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A NEAR RELATION.

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BY

CHRISTABEL R. COLERIDGE,

Author of "LADY BETTY," "HANBURY MILLS," "HUGH CRICHTON'S
ROMANCE," "AN ENGLISH SQUIRE," &c., &c.

"Character is the joint product of nature and nurture."

—PRESIDENT GARFIELD.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:

F. V. WHITE & CO.,

31, SOUTHAMPTON STREET, STRAND, W.C.

1886.



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A NEAR RELATION.

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A NEAR RELATION.

CHAPTER I.

CONFUSION WORSE CONFOUNDED.

“If you gently stroke a nettle,
It will sting you for your pains,
Seize it like a man of mettle
And it soft as silk remains.”

THIS is the history of two children in whose lot there was a strange crook. They were born on the same day in an old farm-house in a remote district of North Wales, where the scenery was wild and mountainous and where hardly a word of English was spoken. Mr. Price, of Plas-y-Gwyn, occasionally let lodgings, and Mr. James Leighton, a busy London barrister, considered himself fortunate in having discovered for himself, and in retaining undiscovered by others, a

spot so perfectly unspoiled and uninvaded. Here he would pursue his favourite sport of fishing, and found in the loneliness and the beauty of the moor and the stream a complete and refreshing contrast to the scenes in which all the rest of his life was spent.

They were destined, however, to lose their charm for him, and to be for ever associated with feelings of annoyance and distress. But the sunny stretch of heathery hills, the brown stream dancing in the light and fringed by bright dark-leaved hollies, graceful ash-trees, and feathery fern, were especially delightful in the eyes of Mrs. Leighton as she sat in an arm-chair by the window of the little sitting-room at Plas-y-Gwyn, feeling all the pleasure of recovering from long and severe illness.

She was a graceful young woman of thirty or thereabouts, with soft grey eyes, abundant reddish hair, and a face which,

though no way remarkable in feature or complexion, was good-looking in the literal sense of the word.

"This has been a very sad time—full of trouble," she said; "but how much we have to be thankful for."

Her husband, who was sitting at the table turning over some papers, rose hastily and came over to the window. He was older than she by fully ten years, and his dark hair and beard had acquired a sprinkling of grey, while his sharply-cut face wore just now an expression of anxious perplexity, half relieved by an odd twinkle as of involuntary amusement in his keen, dark eyes.

"Come what may, I must be thankful to see my wife get well again," he said, with a smile.

"I am feeling quite strong to-day," said Mrs. Leighton. "All I wish for is that Mrs. Price's little boy should get well of his

measles so that I can have my children back! My baby! Fancy never having seen my baby till he is a month old! And you have told me so little about him! I believe you still think, father of three children as you are, that one baby is exactly like another."

"I am afraid so!" said Mr. Leighton. "Your baby is very well, Marian. But now that you are fairly equal to it, I want to talk over all these late events with you."

"I want to hear very much about poor Frank Osgood," said Mrs. Leighton.

"Listen to me," said her husband, "and if I tell the story wrong, correct me. I have a reason for wishing to recall late events very carefully. It is more than a month since I had that telegram from Mr. Barlow, telling me that I was wanted in London about my cousin Frank Osgood's affairs, and I had most unwillingly to leave you in

a hurry. Unhappily, Letty took fright and crossed me on the road. What did she tell you when she arrived?"

"Very little, except that there was some trouble which she did not understand, and that Frank was gone she did not know where. She was too much knocked up to be questioned. She had walked from the cross-road where the coach set her down. But things must have been very bad with them. I wish she had never met Frank; but who could suppose the poor child would be so infatuated! I can see hardly any redeeming point in him. He seems utterly without any sense of honour, and so selfish too."

"Then it will not shock, or at least astonish you very much, to know what the trouble is? Frank's worst vice was gambling, as you know. He got into hopeless trouble, and made use of a large sum of money left in his charge!"

“ Oh, James ! ”

“ Yes. If he had been ten times my cousin I ought not to have recommended him for any place of trust. Still one doesn't expect people to turn out absolute scoundrels. They have utterly failed to trace him. Parker, the other partner you know, was determined to prosecute, but Mr. Barlow, for your sake and Letty's, inclined towards mercy. Colonel Osgood, of course, is in India, but the clergyman, Frank's other uncle, came and showed much good feeling. So the end of it is that he, acting for the colonel and himself, Mr. Barlow and I, have agreed to replace the money to the firm between us. So there will be no prosecution ; but of course he can never show in this country again.”

“ And that poor little baby is worse than fatherless ! ” said Mrs. Leighton after a pause of shocked silence.

“ Yes. Now, Marian, tell me what hap-

pened after I went away, as far as you can recollect?"

"Letty came the next morning. She had travelled all night. I saw before long that she was very ill, and Mrs. Price had gone to see her mother that morning. I had sent Emma with the children to the other cottage to make room, and I went hastily to call her, that we might see about sending for some help. I remember slipping my foot in crossing the stepping stones, and knocking my head against the birch-tree, and after that it's all a blank to me."

"Yes," said her husband, "and when I got back it was to find that poor Letty's troubles were over, that you were in the greatest danger. No wonder there had been hopeless confusion!"

"James, why do you look at me in that way? There is something the matter. Is there anything wrong with the baby? Are you afraid to tell me?"

"My dearest Marian, the babies are both as flourishing and healthy as can be, but you see they are both boys, and of course there was a great confusion. That old woman, Betty Williams, who was called in in a hurry to help, met with a shocking accident."

"Accident to the baby?"

"No, no. But perhaps she wasn't sober. She gave the babies in charge to Gwen, our Welsh beauty, you know, and it appears that she never told her which was which, missed her footing on the stairs in the dark, fell down, and never spoke again. This was what Mrs. Price came home to. There was another ignorant Welsh woman, poor Emma nearly crazy, Letty dying, and you in the greatest danger. Happily nurse and doctor arrived soon after from Carnarvon, in time to save your life, my darling. But by that time the confusion was past mending. And so you see, Marian," he added,

suddenly hastening his tones and starting up, with a laugh most unsuitable to his tragical tale, "they mixed up the babies together."

"Mixed them up!"

"Changed them—confused them. Old Betty brought them to Gwen both together, and bid her mind them, while she went to the mothers. So we don't know which is which—which is ours and which is Letty's."

"Not know my own baby!" cried Mrs. Leighton. "What nonsense! As if I could be deceived. I will tell them apart in a moment. James, you don't mean to say *you* were puzzled?"

"My dear, there doesn't appear to be anything to distinguish them. How *can* I tell?"

"Let me see them this moment," said Mrs. Leighton.

"Listen to me one moment longer. When I came back, in too much alarm

about you to think of anything else, Alice rushed out to meet me, crying, 'Papa, papa, there are two little babies, and we don't know which is *my* little brother.' I never heard her then, but afterwards, when you were better, Emma came to me in floods of tears, with Gwen, begging me to come and look at the children, for only old Mrs. Williams had known which was ours, and she was dead, and could never tell; and what were they to do? I cannot, I must own, feel any certainty in the matter; and nurse Cooper, not knowing what to do when you came to ask for your baby, availed herself of the alarm of measles, or invented it, to send all the children away with Emma to Mrs. Jones's cottage. There it is! Every day the women bring one or other of them to me to ask if I don't see a likeness. What is to be done?"

"Bring *me* the babies," said Mrs. Leighton impatiently.

"They are here, I believe; you shall have them."

He rang the bell, and, as the maid came, said :

"Give the babies to Mrs. Leighton, and leave her to look at them quietly."

The two little boys, across whose path of life had come so strange an entanglement, were brought into the room, and laid side by side in Mrs. Leighton's arms. They were small, but healthy children, one of them rather fatter and rounder-faced than the other, whose features were more defined; this one's hair was abundant, and rather sandy; while the round-faced baby only boasted a few dark hairs round his little head. He blinked and "squirmed" about contentedly, while the other set up an indignant howl.

The nurse and nursemaid, strictly ordered to leave the mother to herself, stood by in silence, and Mr. Leighton watched his wife

intently. She turned the babies about, examined their hands and feet, touched the sandy hair that might promise the colour of her own, and traced the marked features of the one baby with her finger, scanning her husband's face as if to find a likeness between them; and looked carefully at the blunter features of the other to find a Barlow look, all in silence.

At last her lips quivered, large tears gathered in her eyes, and, with an uncontrollable burst of weeping, she sobbed out—

“Oh, I do not know—I do not know my own child! I cannot—I cannot tell!”

Her husband took the babies from her and sent them away.

“Marian!” he said, as he kissed and tried to soothe her, “it is a terrible thing that has happened to us. God guide us to act rightly.”

The husband and wife, to whom had

fallen this perplexing piece of fortune, were prosperous and successful people. James Leighton was a barrister of rising repute, and belonged to a family, many of whose members had stood high in the legal profession. He had married when not very young, a Miss Barlow, the daughter of a country clergyman belonging to a good family ; and as she and himself were both possessed of some private means, they were able to enjoy good society, and were popular among their friends. Their two children were handsome and healthy ; and, with a happy home, plenty of hard, creditable, and remunerative work, varied by an annual trip to any place he might fancy, and by as much intellectual society and lively conversation as he desired, the ideal of the middle-aged high professional Englishman might be said to be reached. He was, moreover, a conscientious and dutiful person, and had never turned the cold

shoulder on his unsuccessful cousin, Frank Osgood, though the latter's extravagance and dissipated habits had caused him to be thrown off by the Osgoods—a well-connected and exemplary family, of whom he was the one black sheep. James Leighton had found Frank a situation, and had given him another chance; a kindness ill repaid, by Frank's paying his addresses to Lettice Barlow. Mrs. Leighton's orphan cousin Lettice was quite unprovided for, and none of her guardians would give their consent; but she was determined, and married Frank Osgood when she came of age. After a year of increasing unhappiness, the terrible catastrophe just related took place. Lettice fled to the only relations who had thought that there was no use in making the bad matter of her marriage worse by giving her up, and had only survived the birth of her baby for a few hours. She lay at rest in the little Welsh church-yard, and Frank

Osgood was a disgraced man, who would never dare to show his face in England again, and had left to his son an inheritance of shame so deep, that even the Leightons, with their own high reputation ready made, could not but feel the reflection of it.

Mr. Leighton had thought the matter through from every possible point of view, during the time when he had been forbidden to tell his wife of the dilemma, yet never without a lingering hope that *somehow* Marian would see her way out of it. That hope seemed vain, and he held aloof, while his wife and Mrs. Price, the nurses, and all concerned, went over every detail of the confusion, examined the babies over and over again, and came each time to a different opinion.

It was not until the evening, when all ~~all~~ this was over, and Mrs. Leighton had wept out her tears, and had been for some

time resting quietly, that she called her husband to her as she lay on the sofa, and said :

“Now, James, I want to tell you what I think we ought to do in these strange circumstances.”

“I very much wish to hear what you think,” he answered, as he came and sat down by her side.

“Then what should you have done with Letty’s child, supposing this mistake had not arisen?”

“I should have found out what the Osgoods would do for him, and—taken the rest, I suppose, upon myself.”

“We should have had to bring him up, poor little fellow, anyhow,” she said.

“Yes; but of course there are ways of bringing up children. I should not probably have given him the expensive education I hope to provide for my own.”

“But now,” said Mrs. Leighton, with a

strain in her peculiarly clear, sweet voice, "if we make any difference we may wrong our own. James, I can love two babies; let us take them both. If we never know—let us love them both."

"We can't keep the thing a secret; too many people know it already."

"Oh no! I was not thinking of anything so silly and romantic. Besides, I have never thought it fair to let children find out painful facts just at the age when they would feel them most. And I like the truth. I think this a great misfortune; it makes me very unhappy. I feel as if I wronged my baby." She paused, then recovered herself with difficulty. "I think we must tell every one the truth—yes, even these babies, when they can understand. But if they must share that sad inheritance, I am not afraid to promise that they shall share a mother's love too."

"The misery is," said Mr. Leighton,

“that the shame must touch both. *My* boy will perhaps feel it—*my* son!”

“It must, as you say, touch both, but it shall injure neither; and when we have *two* dear boys growing up, we shall forget we had once only one. All this will seem like a dream. If the children know the facts they will not dwell on what does not affect their lives.”

“I don’t think you know what you promise. There will be feelings, instincts, we shall not be able to account for. It must mar the full comfort in either. How if, as time goes on, likenesses *do* develop themselves? Suppose we *do* attain, as they grow up, to a conviction, which yet is beyond proof, as to which is our child—suppose we differ about it?”

“If we love them both we shall not wish to lose our part in either of them,” said Mrs. Leighton. “I know,” she added, with some agitation, “that there may be

feelings, but we must do what is right *now*, and trust for the future."

"There is such an absurdity in it!" cried her husband. "One thing, neither child is heir to a farthing, except what I choose to give him; there is not *that* misery in addition. There are no Osgood relations who would care to claim one."

"And Letty being my cousin, and poor Frank yours, you see they both come of Leighton and Barlow," said Mrs. Leighton.

There was a silence, as the poor mother, who, spite of her brave words, felt hurt and wounded in her tenderest feelings in a way she could hardly explain to herself, lay still, suppressing the tears which would have distressed her husband.

Marian Leighton was a person of much strength of character and clearness of conviction, though her happy, prosperous life had not hitherto made any great demand upon her powers, and she instinctively felt

that lives might be made or marred according as they faced at once the strange fate that was laid upon them. They could do no otherwise than bring up the two children, but the spirit in which they did so would make all the difference. In her perplexity and discomfort she *could* almost have shrunk from both the babies; instead, she opened her arms and her heart wider to take in the two.

“Well, Marian!” cried her husband at length, “then you decide. We take these children, knowing ourselves, and letting all whom it may concern know, of the confusion between them. But we take both as our own, and remember, come what may, wishes, opinions, convictions—legal proof is impossible—we must for ever hereafter hold our peace. We cannot decide now, we never must decide in the future. We must never withdraw from either the parental love to which we pledge ourselves.”

"We take them both," said Marian, solemnly. "God help us to do right by them! Now," she added after a moment or two, "let us look at our children. Please to call nurse, and ask her to bring them to me." She took the little creatures into her arms, and kissed them both in a solemn, formal way. "They are both dear, dear little babies," she said. "Nurse, they are both to be my dear little twins."

"And I'm sure, ma'am, they are both very fine children. Though I shall always say that this little fair one has the most look of the family; but Emma, she thinks different. She thinks this one——"

"Hush!" interposed Mr. Leighton. "Remember that subject is to be dropped for ever. No one is to endeavour to make a choice between them. I shall go out for a stroll. Rest now, Marian; you will tire yourself."

He hurried away without another look at

the babies; while his wife, through tears that came every now and then thick and blinding, made ordinary commonplace arrangements for their welfare, and finally called her little girl and boy to her side, and showing them the babies, said earnestly:

“Listen to me, my darlings, and try to understand me. It has pleased God to take dear Cousin Letty away from us, and one of these poor little babies has no mamma. So I take them both for my babies, and you, Alice and Fred, have two little brothers instead of one.”

“But where’s Cousin Frank?” asked little Alice.

Mrs. Leighton hesitated for a moment, and then, for the benefit of both children and servants, said:

“Poor Cousin Frank has gone away. He has done something that is not right, that has grieved papa and me. We will

not talk about him ; we must be sorry for him, and say our prayers for him. Kiss the babies, my darlings."

But Alice pushed her little finger into the fat baby's cheek, and said, laughing :

"I think *this* is my *real* little brother ;" while poor Fred, an ex-baby himself, tried to push past them on to his mother's knee.

"Both little brothers," said Mrs. Leighton. But as she let Freddy take his old place, a feeling that here was her own boy indeed came like a warning of the rocks in her path. She could only kiss the children all round and be silent.

There followed a great deal of troublesome correspondence with Osgoods and Barlows, which finally resulted in a general approval of the course adopted as the only possible one. A clear and careful statement of the whole matter was written out by Mr. Leighton, and kept in case any future satisfaction was needed, or in case Frank

Osgood should ever return and claim his child. A notice of Lettice's death and of the child's birth was put into the American and Colonial papers, in case it might fall in his way.

The babies were baptised in the little Welsh church hard by, the fairer one as Geoffrey Leighton, and the other as Alexander Leighton, and were registered as Geoffrey Leighton Leighton or Osgood, and Alexander Leighton Leighton or Osgood, both henceforward to bear the name of Leighton.

This over Mr. and Mrs. Leighton returned to London with their four children, to work out the problem put before them.



CHAPTER II.

CHILDREN OF ONE FAMILY.

“The child is father of the man.”

ONE afternoon in July, nearly ten years after the events related in the last chapter, a large party of children were playing in the garden of an old-fashioned house in Chelsea—a house which now perhaps might be sought in vain among the changes produced by bricks and mortar, stucco, and the Thames Embankment ; but the like of which might be seen on the river's bank, or in the quaint old streets running up from it, at any rate till a very recent period.

Whether Mr. Leighton had been attracted by the low rent of the roomy and substantial house, or Mrs. Leighton by the advantages of the big garden for the chil-

dren, or whether, with a sense of "high art" in advance of their time, they had seized on the chance of living in a real "Queen Anne" house, Sloane House was a very happy home for the young Leightons. They believed in the "country walks" which they took among the nursery gardens of Fulham, or up Swan Lane to the Old Brompton Road and the Kensington lanes; they liked to stand on Battersea Bridge and watch the steamboats, and admired, spite of mud and fog, the silver lights on Chelsea Reach, which Turner painted; they bought goodies at the "Fairy Land Establishment for Delicious Sweets"—a small shed on wheels where sugar plums and cigars were alike obtainable; they were greatly interested in the red coats of the children at the Duke of York's School, and in the old pensioners at Chelsea Hospital.

They considered that the possession of a "garden" gave them an amount of moral

and social superiority over their London friends, with which no amount of riches or fashion, no smart frocks, no superiority at dancing schools or French classes could possibly compete.

Other people's mothers might have large drawing-rooms, and two horses to their carriages, but they possessed out-houses, an arbour, a shrubbery, a lawn, and a kitchen-garden. They grew their own cabbages, had pies made of their own gooseberries, and a fernery, round which grew real primroses, while bluebells were quite wild in the shrubbery.

The lawn in question was large and square, with the turf now—in July—burnt very brown, while the flowering trees and shrubs with which, after the manner of suburbs, the garden was prettily planted, had already acquired almost an autumnal look—the leaves of the great horse-chestnut were brown and shrivelled.

The family were engaged in playing "ogre"—a romantic form of prisoners' base, in which violent exercise and personal contests unite with a touch of imagination to render the game attractive to various temperaments—and were now standing round the old summer-house, which formed the ogre's castle, disputing over a knotty point.

"I say, the girls ought to take turns in being ogres!" cried Fred Leighton, now a fine boy of twelve.

"There never was such a thing heard of as a girl being an ogre! It's an absolutely impossible thing!" retorted Alice, as if she were laying down a law of nature.

"That's because you girls have everything your own way. You want to get rid of us, and so you pretend we're ogres and send us away!" screamed Geoffrey, at the top of his voice.

"Well," put in Alick, as if he had found

a peaceable solution, "let's play that the girls are witches, and have good ogres."

"Good ogres!" Every one turned on Alick in horror at the heterodoxy of this suggestion. "Ogres can't be good, any more than demons in a pantomime. Alick is so silly!"

"Well, all I know is," said Fred, "that it's a girls' game altogether, and if Meadows and Palmer had come back with me, I shouldn't have played at it."

"Of course, *we* only play at such a rough game to amuse you boys," retorted Alice.

Perhaps the height of a quarrel is not a very favourable moment to describe the young Leightons; but they were a lively, contentious, sharp-tongued set, proud to find the weak spots in each other's harness, and breezes were frequent.

Alice was now a slim girl of fourteen, with sharp, delicate features, a bush of chestnut hair, very bright eyes, and a

satirical smile. She was clever, and on a level with girls much older than herself at the classes which she attended. She was industrious too, and obedient, but not a model elder daughter and sister, for she had a faculty for setting the younger ones' tempers on edge, and of leaving behind her a sense of irritation. Fred was much more good-natured, and much more popular. He was a great sturdy boy of twelve, just promoted to Westminster from the preparatory school which he, Alick, and Geoffrey had hitherto attended together. Fred was dark, like the Leightons, but his father shook his head over the construing and arithmetic, which were not quite up to the mark of his own at the same age. Still, Fred was a good boy, and much admired by his juniors. People who saw Geoffrey and Alick for the first time frequently exclaimed, "Why, no one would think they were brothers, much less twins!" But on

the other hand, no one ever doubted that Alick was brother to Fred, while Geoffrey's likeness to Alice was often commented on. Yet Alice and Fred bore to each other a likeness in unlikeness, which proved their kinship; but Mrs. Leighton never traced in Alick's round, simple face the delicate lines and rather peculiar prettiness of Geoffrey's. Nor was there between them any of the exclusive attachment often so prettily shown by twin children. They did not quarrel; but the warmest spot in Alick's heart was certainly given up to Fred, and Geoffrey made a great pet of Marian, the next sister—a little laughing thing of seven, usually called May. A boy of four, named James, completed the family.

The so called twins were both clever, Geoffrey the most so. He was also the liveliest and the most original, the least accommodating, and the most obstinate of

the family circle, who were on the whole a satisfactory set of children, with good health, spirits, and dispositions. They knew, they had always known, the puzzle between the twins; but, so far as Mrs. Leighton could detect, it merely lay in their minds as a dead fact, which bore for them no meaning. Nor did she ever force it on them; for in truth it had almost lost its significance for her. She no longer wished to know the truth; she never, strange as it may seem, had been able to form an opinion on it. Her unselfish effort had met with its reward, and she did equally love the two children. She taught the whole set alike to name in their prayers "our near relation, Frank Osgood, who is far away," and in pursuance of her resolution that there should never be any surprise, as each child grew old enough to understand the words, she repeated pretty much in the same form the explanation

she had given, in the first instance, to Alice and Fred. There the matter dropped, and with each succeeding year she thought less about it.

After the first excitement passed, no word on the subject ever passed Mr. Leighton's lips. He checked his wife's occasional allusions to it, and treated the children with careful impartiality. But perhaps it was natural that his girls, his eldest boy, and again his little youngest, should attract more spontaneous attention than the unimportant intermediates.

On the present occasion, the game of "ogre" breaking up in the dispute previously recorded, Alice strolled away with the girl friends who had joined in the game, and Fred proposed to the younger ones the delightful half-holiday occupation of "cleaning out the guinea-pigs."

He and Geoffrey were eagerly occupied in performing this operation while Alick

and May watched the guinea-pigs, which were turned loose on the grass during their house-cleaning, when Mrs. Leighton, accompanied by a tall old gentleman with white hair and long white moustaches, came out from the house towards them.

"Oh, Fred," cried Alick, "the white guinea-pig's run away!"

"Now, if you've let *my* white one run away, I'll—I'll give your black one to the Salnees," exclaimed Geoffrey, dropping an armful of hay and flying indignantly at Alick.

"It's in the bushes," said May.

"Shut up, Geoff, or you sha'n't have it back again," said Fred; and into the midst of the bushes the whole party plunged, and were deaf to their mother's voice, till, with a shout of "I've got him!" Geoffrey, covered with earth and dust, emerged from the lilac bushes with the white guinea-pig squeezed tight in his arms.

"Mamma! Alick let him escape."

"Hush, Geoff. Don't you see I have a visitor? Put away that guinea-pig, and come and speak to General Osgood. Where is Alick?"

"Here, mamma." And Alick, equally dishevelled, crawled out from under a rhododendron. Geoffrey shut up his guinea-pig and advanced, holding out his dirty little paw, like a well-mannered child, Alick, rather more timidly, following his example.

"Are these the children?" said General Osgood, with a grave voice that sounded formidable.

"Yes. This is Geoffrey—this is Alick."

"So you are twins, my little boys?" said the stranger.

"Yes, sir," said Alick, as Geoffrey stared at the speaker.

"You are not much alike."

"I'm like Alice, Alick's like Fred," said

Geoffrey, in the loud tones which often brought him into disgrace.

"*Are you like Alice? Where is she?*" said General Osgood, looking him over and over with a glance the keenness of which annoyed the child, and awoke a pang in Mrs. Leighton's breast. Could it be that General Osgood, poor Frank's uncle, returned after a long absence in India, could trace the features of *his* family in *her* Geoffrey, as she entirely felt him to be?

"We think him like Alice," she said, rather timidly, as her daughter came up, casting a glance of reproach at her exceedingly dirty little brothers.

"So he is," said the general, briefly. "Well, Mrs. Leighton, I am most sensible of the goodness shown by Mr. Leighton and yourself. I feel of course that the child, if identified, would have a claim on me; but I understand that you do not wish any change to be made?"

"Oh no; we have long forgotten that we ever thought the perplexity a misfortune," returned Mrs. Leighton, hurriedly.

These remarks were exchanged in an undertone, but now General Osgood turned to the children, patted the twins on the head, and dropped a sovereign into the hand of each.

"You go to school? A little school-boy tip for you," he said, as he turned away with Mrs. Leighton.

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed Fred. "'To think of you little shavers getting all that! Here's a go!"

"Why, don't you know," said Alice, "what it's for? He thinks one of them belongs to him. He's their uncle."

"Oh, shut up, Alice!" said Fred, colouring; "never mind all that nonsense."

"It's not nonsense," said Alice. "You all know it as well as I do, only we never think about it."

"What do you mean?" said Geoffrey, with scarlet cheeks.

"Why," said Alice, lightly, "you know quite well mamma has always told you that one of you is not really her little boy, not our brother at all, only no one knows which. Cousin Lettice was his mother, and cousin Frank Osgood his father, *I* know, and I used to hear Emma talk about it. Which is it, I wonder? Fred, which do you think is the right one? I think it is rather fine to guess."

"Oh, shut up, Alice!" said Fred again, with an angry sense of dislike of the mystery.

"Well," persisted Alice, "anyway they are not *each other's brothers*, we know that."

"*I am everybody's brother!*" cried Alick, bursting suddenly into a roar and thumping Alice. "You are a nasty—unkind—girl—Alice."

"I can't help it," said Alice. "What does it signify? It is all the same now."

"Well, don't make a row about it then," said Fred, running off to escape from the awkward subject, as Alice, herself a little uncomfortable, turned towards the house.

Alick sat on the grass, still crying; Geoffrey stood quite still by his side, and an utter silence fell on them. There came upon them, each towards the other, a curious sense of reserve and shyness; they were tongue-tied, they could not speak. The idea, now for the first time brought home to them, was too mysterious, too dreadful, to be discussed. Unconsciously, they felt the delicacy and difficulty of their position towards each other, and neither could be the first to speak a word. They were afraid of each other.

After a minute or two Alick jumped up and ran into the house, while Geoffrey, left alone, crept into the corner behind the

guinea-pigs' house and wept far harder tears. He could not speak, he could not have explained; but he felt as if all the foundations of his life were slipping away from him.

But Alick ran to his well-known refuge, and, finding his mother in the drawing-room, hid his face in her arms.

"Mamma, I am your little boy—I am!" he sobbed out, finding voice at last.

"Yes, my boy; I have got two little boys, that is all," she said, kissing him.

"But, mamma, that old man—Alice said he belonged to *the other of us*."

"You knew that before, Alick dear," said Mrs. Leighton. "It is quite true. My little boys have a strange thing in their lives; but they must not mind, because we all love them just alike."

"But Alice said Geoff and I *certainly* weren't—weren't—"

"Geoff and you must try to make up to

each other for any strange feelings that may come across you. It is the same for both of you, so you must be very kind to each other. But you have only to be good children and not trouble about it."

"Won't it make any difference, mamma?"

"No, my darling, never, in our love."

"Then I don't mind. Mamma, mamma, my very *own* mamma," said Alick, clinging closer and closer.

"My own little boy! But where is Geoff?"

"In the garden. I—I didn't like to speak to Geoff."

"Go and call him."

But Geoffrey was nowhere to be found, till, the tea bell ringing, he emerged from the nursery, clean, and looking much as usual.

Alick had quite recovered his spirits, and began to talk presently about his sovereign.

"Mamma must take care of such a quantity of money," he said.

"Yes, I think so," said his mother.
"Where's yours, Geoffrey, dear?"

"I threw it down the well," said Geoffrey loudly. "I won't have it."

"That was rather foolish," said Mrs. Leighton, gravely, "because you see, it will give Robert a good deal of trouble in getting it out."

Geoffrey said nothing, and May said that there were black-beetles in the well, which gave rise to speculations on its depth, which was inconsiderable.

Mrs. Leighton caught Geoffrey to smooth his rough hair and give him a special kiss, but he wriggled out of her arms, and she was afraid to force his confidence.

All the children joined in an unusually noisy game of hide-and-seek after tea, with entirely recovered spirits.

But at bed-time Alick said to Geoffrey—

“ Geoff, if you like I’ll give you half my black guinea-pig, and you shall give me half your white one ”

“ Why ? ” said Geoffrey.

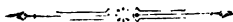
“ I thought it would be nice to have them between us.”

Geoffrey gave him an odd look, almost as of an elder seeing through the childish expedient.

“ Well,” he said, rather gruffly, “ if you like.”

Alick said his prayers, and having put the painful subject away from him, repeated Frank Osgood’s name, with no more thought than usual.

But Geoffrey, from that day forward, left it out.



CHAPTER III.

MOTHER AND SONS.

“A rosebud set in little wilful thorns.”

GENERAL OSGOOD's visit passed and was never repeated, nor was it often, if ever, referred to by the children. For it did not prove possible to carry out Mrs. Leighton's original notion, and let the puzzle be regarded as an open and commonplace fact of no moment to anyone, easily discussed and freely commented on. It was painful and mysterious, and she felt that it must be let drop, especially as allusions to it always made Alick tearful and Geoffrey savage. So, rather against her own previous instincts, she desired Alice never to tease her brothers by referring to it, and it really could hardly be said to be known to May

and Jem. She had not meant it to be a bugbear, but a bugbear it was to herself and to the children. She felt a certain sense of it in the occasional extra warmth of Alick's caresses, and fancied that the recollection of it was not absent, from a peculiar absorbed sullen look that now and then clouded Geoffrey's very pretty and attractive countenance, though he was ordinarily a merry, high-spirited child, and though violent-tempered and very rough in his ways, was somehow the mainspring of the children's life, the inventor of games, and the planner of adventures. Another fact also became evident as the twins approached their teens, namely, that he was by very much the cleverer and more industrious, the one likely to follow the father's footsteps, and shine in the world of school and college. This Fred never would do, and Alick, though bright enough in his way, was lazy and dawdling, with a wonderful

faculty for getting into school scrapes. He was a very big boy, with a heavy, plain-featured face ; redeemed by a pair of great, soft, dark eyes, and a sweet voice and gentle manners ; while Geoffrey, in curious contrast to his refined and delicate looks, was loud-voiced and rough.

All these little peculiarities were noted in the twins, as they never were in the other children ; and though Mrs. Leighton made a principle of abstaining from remarks, she knew exactly how far Geoffrey, in common with Alice and the baby Jem, retained the sharp Leighton features and her own auburn tinting ; while the other three, so people said, were Barlows all over, but for their father's complexion. And yet she often said to herself that imagination must not lead her astray, as, sometimes in one lad and sometimes in the other, she believed herself to see strange traits, unfamiliar characteristics.

As for the two boys themselves, they recollected, as is often the case with children, the strange fact about themselves much oftener than any one guessed; but Alick pushed away the thought, turned to the undoubted affection by which he was surrounded, and troubled but little about it. Nor did it give Geoffrey active pain, but the idea possessed an uncomfortable fascination for him, and his attention being always awake, he acquired much more information about the Osgood family than any one imagined.

Cousin Letty's photograph had retained its place among the family portraits, and Geoffrey studied it till he felt sure that the soft round contour was quite unlike his own. But what was that Frank Osgood like, whose name Geoffrey regarded with an intense, though silent, aversion? Geoffrey entertained a strong suspicion, how acquired he could not say, that a certain old

daguerreotype, which he had found tumbling about in a drawer, represented this "near relation." It certainly was the portrait of a handsome young man, with an aquiline nose and a bright, lively expression. Geoffrey thought the nose was like his own when he felt up and down the bridge of it. But then he did not feel sure, and he could not ask whether the portrait was not "only papa" after all. Another opinion held by Geoffrey at this time, for which he could have given no reason, was that "papa knew." Mamma, he felt sure, was as ignorant as they were, but he was convinced that papa knew.

He also found out that the General Osgood who had visited them was the elder brother of Frank Osgood's long dead father, that he had four sons and two daughters of his own, had been for many years in India, had a place in the country, and that altogether the Osgoods were a family of some con-

sideration, and, if anything, a little above the mark of the Leightons themselves. This information had been picked up by chance words of the Leighton and Barlow relations, especially on the annual Christmas visit to Granby Rectory, where Mrs. Leighton's parents still lived, and where, by the way, Geoffrey himself was a great favourite, and privately regarded as the true grandson.

This was all very well ; but a London schoolboy, living in the midst of clever and lively discussion of newspapers, novels, and plays, was not so ignorant of the world as to regard the absolute silence in which Frank Osgood's fate was wrapped as insignificant. He longed to ask whether he was known to be alive, and all sorts of theories, some dangerously near the truth, were worked out in his mind.

Mrs. Leighton had never intended to conceal the facts ; but she did not imagine them likely to have occurred to the children,

and she never found a fitting time to speak of them.

In the third spring after General Osgood's visit, when the pair were between twelve and thirteen, Rose Barlow, the daughter of Mrs. Leighton's eldest brother, a clergyman in the north of England, came up to London to stay with her aunt, and to see a little of London society.

Rose was just eighteen, and she was the prettiest and most charming creature the Leighton children had ever seen. Alice swore eternal friendship with her on the spot, little May was for ever at her side, and the three boys all fell victims to her at once. "Grown up" and "come out" as Rose might be, she would play games in the garden, take long straggling walks by the river, where she would learn the names of all the steamers and the difference between "citizens" and "iron boats," or up Walnut Tree Walk and the Kensington lanes, or out

by Walham Green and Fulham, which she could not think so delightfully rural as did her cousins.

“Cabbages and dusty hedges!” she said mischievously one day on her return. “Where are your wild flowers?”

“Cousin Rosie, I found a real bit of hawthorn in flower last month,” cried May. “And there are buttercups, and milkmaids, Rosie, there are indeed!”

“It is much better than streets for the children,” said Alice, grandly.

“Children, indeed!” exclaimed Geoffrey. “Oh, *you’re* come out, I suppose, and *your* frocks are made long, and *you* go to dinner-parties like Rosie, don’t you?”

“She will go soon, won’t you, Alice?” said Rosie.

“Oh, I dare say,” returned Geoffrey; “but it’s the principle I object to. It’s so mean to pretend to be bigger than you are. I don’t pretend to be as big as Fred!”

"Precious little use if you did, a little whipper-snapper like you," said Fred, comfortably.

"Geoffrey 'll never grow big, he's always in a hurry," said Alick.

"I'm not such a lazy-bones as you," retorted Geoffrey.

"Geoff," suddenly said Mr. Leighton's voice behind the group, "don't use such a tone of voice to your brothers. You must not be so rough. Wherever I am I always hear *you*. You shout like a costermonger. Alick and Fred together don't equal you.

The reproof was perfectly just, and very good-humouredly given, but Geoffrey looked as black as thunder ; and Rosie, by way of making peace, said kindly :

"People are different, you know."

"Well," said Alice, with some petulance, "*I* think Geoff *is* different from all of us. *Very* different."

"Hush, hush, Alice," said Alick, with a violent blush ; while Geoffrey—anger breaking through his reserve—exclaimed :

"Grandmamma says I'm your very image!"

Mr. Leighton was wont to say that it was a pity that Rose—with all her beauty and all her good nature—was, after all, an inveterate goose ; and perhaps she proved the fact now, for with a little eager gesture she exclaimed excitedly :

"Ab, now that is what I want to hear of! Don't quarrel, but *do* tell me all about that interesting story. How exciting and amusing not to know quite which is which."

"We never bother about it," said Fred, sturdily.

"I don't see why Geoff should be in a passion about it," said Alice.

"Oh, but I should be always trying to find out! I should like it. I think Geoff

is like Alice. Don't you feel a sort of instinct? I do like anything romantic."

"It's—it's all *rot*," said Geoffrey, furiously.

"Oh, never mind, Geoffrey," said Rosie, trying to improve matters. "You'll find out some day, no doubt. Perhaps Mr. Osgood will come home and know which of you is his son."

"Oh, he can't come home," said Alice, thoughtlessly. "He would be punished if he did. Why, he absconded!"

Even the heedless Alice flushed at her own words as she saw Rose look much shocked, while Fred said sternly:

"Hush, Alice; we're all his cousins, anyway."

"Oh, we won't talk about it, come and dress," said Rose, getting up from the grass where she had been sitting; and Alice, a little afraid of the look in Geoffrey's eyes, followed her.

"Come now, you two," said Fred, after a pause. "Never you mind about it. It can't be both of you, and it's nothing to either."

Alick, who looked the most shocked and startled of the two, flung himself towards Fred and whispered :

"*Did* he?"

"Yes, with a lot of money. Never mind. It don't matter."

Alick was too big now to cry comfortably, so he lay still, face downward, on the grass.

"I should like to kill him!" suddenly said Geoff.

"Oh! I—I wouldn't say that, Geoff, if I were you," said Fred, in mild reproof.

"Yes," said Geoffrey, "if you were me—you would."

"They can't have two papas, can they?" ejaculated May, who had been listening open-mouthed to this discussion.

"No," said Fred, "and, remember, no one here is to talk about it any more."

So the subject was pushed still further back from the surface, and became a *bête noir* to all the family,

The next event after Rose Barlow's visit was over that occurred in the Leighton family was, that all the children most inconveniently caught the measles, just as they ought to have been going away for their summer outing. Geoffrey was not very ill, but he was very troublesome; and most of the extra attention he received, beyond the necessary precautions, consisted in orders not to make such a noise; to mind what the nurses said to him, and not to be rude to Alice, who, recovering fast, tried to help her mother with the younger ones. He did not see much of his mother; and by-and-bye he gathered that Alick, who had been put into another room, was much more ill than the rest, and that there

was some anxiety about him. Geoffrey did not at all realise the idea of losing his brother; but the odd notions that crossed his mind, as he thought of himself as "the only one of the two," would baffle description. He did not like to see Fred cry when he heard that Alick was worse, nor to think how every one was taken up with him.

The alarm, however, soon passed over, and was chiefly memorable as leading to a long conversation between Alick and his mother on the forbidden topic. When light-headed he had recurred to Rosie's thoughtless words, and had woke, crying out that he had lost mamma, he didn't belong to mamma, in a way that had distressed her much, and when he was getting better, she thought it well to talk the whole matter out with him, and, if possible, to extract the sting.

Alick seemed surprised, and said, simply :

"But I don't think much about it when I'm well, mamma. Geoff minds it a great deal more."

"Does he? Does he ever talk about it?"

"Oh, no. *We* couldn't talk about it," said Alick, oddly enough.

"Well," said Mrs. Leighton, "have you anything on your mind about it? Would you like to ask me any questions?"

Alick considered a little, and then said: "Do you think it possible that we shall ever find out?"

"Not positively, and therefore I should advise you not to try to look out for trifling indications."

"We should go on living just the same; we shouldn't have to—to be any one else if you did find out, mother?"

"No, Alick; nothing would make any difference. You will always bear our name; you are our children. I want you to feel the *certainty* of the family love

around you, and not to dwell on this doubtful matter."

"Well then, mother, I don't think we ought to mind it much. I do mind it somehow, but I sha'n't care so much now."

"My darling, indeed you must not."

"It's very good of you and of father," said Alick, presently.

"No, dear, we can't help loving our little boys."

"Mamma, there are two things about it I don't like."

"What are they?"

"Why, mamma, you see I *know* Geoff isn't my own brother."

"Well, Alick, there *is* a very real tie between you and Geoff—for you both have the same burden to bear."

"Yes, so we have. No one else can feel just as we do. And mamma, do—do you think that—that other man will ever come back, and then—what—what? We ought

not to want him to stay away and die wicked?"

The difficulty with which Alick got out these words showed that here was the core of the trouble, and Mrs. Leighton could not talk it away.

"We know nothing about it," she said. "But remember this, my boy—if God should ever lay a heavy burden on you and Geoffrey, He has given you all our love to help you to bear it. Now do not talk or think about it any more."

"I won't," said Alick; and with a long sigh of relief he put away all the bitterness of his lot, though deep down in his mind remained the grave sense of an especial trial.

Mrs. Leighton felt it much more difficult to talk to Geoffrey, but she resolved to make the attempt, longing for the confidence which Alick gave so freely.

She found Fred, who disliked books, making the best of the situation, and com-

fortably reading the *Tower of London*; while Geoffrey, who usually devoured stories of all kinds, was throwing a ball about the room, as the only possible way of making a disturbance.

“Hurray! Mother, here you are! How’s Alick?” said Fred.

“Oh, much better. Well, Geoff, are you very tired of being a prisoner?”

“I hate it!” said Geoffrey.

“Well, I am going to let you out. Come into my room for a little.”

Geoffrey was so delighted at the change, and in such spirits, that she felt it an unpropitious moment; but after he had subsided a little she began:

“My dear, Alick has been troubling himself a good deal about some remarks made by Rosie, but I think I have set his mind at rest. I should be very sorry if you let any puzzles trouble you, Geoff. Shall we talk it over?”

Geoffrey fixed his eyes on her with a curious, half-frightened look, and then suddenly daring his fate, jerked out :

“Do you know which it is?”

“No, Geoffrey, I don’t wish to know.”

“Do you *think* it’s me?”

“I don’t think about it. As I told Alick, you and he must rest sure of our love. You *know* we love you both as our own. Never mind what is doubtful. It is not a pleasant thought; but there is no need to dwell on it.”

“I think it’s very hard,” said Geoffrey, frowning.

“Well, Geoff, if it is, you must both try to be all the braver and truer, and to bear it well.” A light came into Geoffrey’s eyes for a moment, but he was evidently struggling with tears.

“I *am* like Alice,” he said, fiercely; “and I’m much cleverer than Alick—much more like papa.”

“Geoff, I don’t like to see you make comparisons. Try to be kind and loving all round, and forget this grievance. Give me a kiss now, my boy. I want one.”

Then Geoffrey did come slowly near and lay his head down on her shoulder, but the resentment in his mind was unsubdued. After all, nothing that any one *said* could make any difference.

When Mrs. Leighton reported these two conversations to her husband, he said :

“I shall send them both away to school. There shall be a break in the home life, and new associations will be good for both of them. Besides, Geoffrey at least will soon outstrip Fred, and a different school will be best.” And so, country air being also considered good for Alick, who needed change after his illness, the boys were sent to a recently modernised and very popular grammar school at Oxley, a large country town within easy distance of London.

CHAPTER IV.

WHEN SHE WAS A LITTLE GIRL.

“ I remember, I remember,
How my childhood fled by.”

At the time* when Geoffrey and Alick Leighton went to school at Oxley, other stories, already recorded for such few as may have cared to read them, were working themselves out in its neighbourhood—stories the actors in which were destined sensibly to influence the after lives of the young Leightons. But in their early school-life they saw very little of the southern side of the town, and Redhurst village and Fordham Beeches were places only reached in an occasional holiday ramble. The ground on which the new grammar school buildings had been erected lay on a hill some way to the north of Oxley, and had

* See “ Hugh Crichton’s Romance.” Macmillan & Co.

been bought from the owner of Blackford Park, Lord Lydford, while the other great house on that side was Willingham Hall, which had been purchased some ten years before by the father of General Osgood. He had not lived to enjoy it long, and the general, who had retired from the army, was now the owner of it, and made it a charming holiday home for his married sons and daughters.

The new grammar school buildings were thought very ugly by the old inhabitants of Oxley; and troops of boys in the High Street, and a large increase of villa residences in the suburbs were not regarded as adding to the charms of life; so that, though Mr. Spencer Crichton, of the Oxley Bank, had been one of the gentlemen concerned in re-organising the old foundation, his mother, to whom Redhurst House belonged, always congratulated herself that the new buildings were well away from *her*

end of Oxley; and perhaps the Misses Venning, with their well-established girls' school, were not sorry that their pretty Oxley Manor was safe on the Redhurst side also. When Alick and Geoffrey went to school, the buildings were hardly finished, and they were among the first pupils on the new footing. Mr. Leighton's attention had been directed to the school by the engagement of their pretty cousin, Rose Barlow, to Mr. Stafford, the clever young headmaster, who was hoping to make the school flourish, and was very glad of such a connection as Mr. Leighton's sons.

The neighbourhood of Willingham Hall was taken into consideration, but was not regarded as an objection, as it was not thought right to withdraw the boys from the occasional notice of General Osgood, nor to make intercourse with that family markedly unusual.

Geoffrey and Alick were in the head-

master's house, the only one at first started; and when in due time Mr. Stafford brought home his bride, perhaps they were the only boys in the increasing school who did not lose their hearts to her; but neither had forgotten, and Geoffrey had never forgiven, Rosie Barlow's questions and comments on their story.

Among their companions were a grandson of General Osgood's, and two boys of the name of Fordham, his distant cousins, who attended the school as day-boys, and lived at Fairfield, an old brown house lying low in the meadows on the side of the grammar school away from Oxley.

Fairfield lay in the midst of undisturbed pastoral country, with green fields cut into odd and unexpected shapes by tall, untidy hedges, traversed by numerous foot-paths, which led over impossible stiles, to old-fashioned farm-houses and small villages, thickly scattered over the fields. There

was no fine scenery, and few local peculiarities; it was just "the country," as generations of peaceful monotonous life had left it, sweet with a good store of commonplace wild flowers, and with little to distinguish it in a stranger's eyes from many another English landscape. But yet, each of those fields had individual charms. No hedge was exactly like another in the eyes of those who were growing up among them. Dulcie Fordham and her brothers knew those "hedgerow elms and hillocks green" with a most perfect knowledge. They grew up in that large square house, brown and dark with the stains of many winters. They played in the large rambling garden, all along the southern side of which ran a high substantial brick wall, broadening towards its base, with wide, shallow buttresses, and with a narrow ledge of bricks running along it about a foot from the top, on which, among the moss and the lichens,

grew stonecrop and wallflowers, house-leek and London-pride. The inside of the wall was well covered with fruit trees, and beyond, a broad sunny meadow sloped down to the banks of the river Oxe, the slow-flowing waters of which turned and twisted the clayey banks into bays and peninsulas, beautiful with a great variety of field and water plants, and affording the boys many a chase after actual rats and mythical otters.

Captain Fordham was a retired Indian officer, who early in life had met with an accident which had forced him to leave the service, and had, of course, seriously affected his fortunes. He was attracted by the large, low-rented house, and his wife by the neighbourhood of her relations, of whom she was fond. Their means were narrow, and they led a very quiet and somewhat monotonous life. Captain Fordham's health was delicate, but he found occupation in

his garden, and in the village of Blackwood in filling the various parochial offices always pressed upon a gentleman of leisure, and in ruling his family with a certain military strictness, and on religious principles, minutely carried out. James, Edgar, and Dulcie Fordham had to conform to somewhat old-fashioned rules, and to render a very strict obedience.

It was on the long, warm evenings of early summer that Dulcie Fordham always felt that the old-fashioned system of education which consigned her to bed at eight o'clock was a great hardship. Thirteen years old last month, and to be banished upstairs like a baby! Dulcie knelt on the window-seat and leaned out of the open window, into the cool hush of the evening. It was a large room with white painted panels, scantily and simply furnished, but the air was sweet with the scent of many flowers; great bunches of lilac westeria

hung over Dulcie's head, and the first yellow roses tempted her to reach out of the window after them. Below was a pretty, inexpensively kept garden, with rougher turf and duller gravel than is to be found where money is no object ; but with abundance of flowering trees and shrubs, and with old haunts of primroses and lilies of the valley that it would have been difficult to rival. Dulcie looked across a bit of pleasant lawn to a broad, straight, gravel walk, beyond which was a flower-bed, and the wall, here covered with budding roses. Beyond, again, were the fields and lanes, melting into the park of Willingham, where dwelt her distant cousins, whom, though she saw but seldom, she regarded as important and interesting people.

Dulcie saw it all without precisely looking at it, just as she heard without listening the cawing of the rooks and song of the thrushes, as she smelt and fingered the

nearest westeria bunch, while her large round grey eyes looked into nothing, and her thoughts floated away into dreamland.

She was a slim, angular little girl, tall for her age, with slender limbs, and a delicately-featured face, a pale though pretty complexion, full rosy lips, and large eyes—half vague, half wistful—the whole set off by very curly brown hair. Dulcie was given to day-dreams; just now she hardly knew what she was thinking of: all the sweet sights and scents and sounds mingled together and filled her mind. Presently she saw her mother and one of the grammar school masters, who was spending the evening with them, come away from the lawn and walk slowly up and down the path. Dulcie drew back behind her veil of creepers, but through the still clear air she caught a few words of their talk.

“ Ah, yes! There was a young Osgood who turned out very ill,” said Mrs. Fordham.

“ Well, he died abroad, I believe ; but he was married, and one of these boys is certainly his son. The Leightons educate them both, and they bear their name.”

“ How strange ! And which ? ”

“ That is just what no one can say with certainty.” Here Dulcie lost the thread as the speakers moved on.

She listened eagerly, and as they turned back her mother was saying :

“ A great trial, which seems to have been most bravely met.”

“ Yes, the Leightons are good people.”

More murmurs, and then :

“ Yes, good sort of fellows both of them. Geoffrey much the most distinguished. As you know, they are called twins.” Something more inaudible, then the master’s voice :

“ No—no secret, I believe. Mrs. Stafford told me she is their cousin. Of course, it is not talked of in the school.”

"I knew something of it," said Mrs. Fordham.

"Shall we go in? It is getting chilly."

Dulcie, when the voices died away, hurried into bed to try to piece together these fragments of mystery. She was not allowed to read novels, and consequently exercised her vivid fancy on every romance in real life that came across her path.

She knew the Leightons, who occasionally accompanied her brothers home, and though she was not allowed to join in their pursuits, or to be very intimate with them, she knew that they had been at school for more than two years, that Alick was her brother James' friend, but that Geoffrey was higher in the school, and more distinguished in the sports. It had always been a disappointment to her that twin brothers should be so unlike; but now—if that was accounted for—

As she tried to piece together the hints

she had overheard, it suddenly struck her that she had not been intended to listen to them, and she blushed all over in her solitude with shame at the thought of her unintentional eavesdropping.

"I never would have listened in a room," thought she; "but, somehow, out of doors I never thought of it. I must tell mamma."

With which resolution she satisfied her conscience sufficiently to go to sleep; but the subject was still on her mind when she presented herself at the early breakfast, which all the family shared, before the boys went to school and the daily governess arrived for herself.

It was a sunny, pleasant dining-room, white-panelled like nearly all the house, with three narrow windows, with a window seat in each, and carpet and curtains of the last degree of shabbiness; but with cheerful monthly roses peeping in through the little square panes. James and Edgar

were nice-looking boys of sixteen and seventeen, of a small wiry type. James intended to take Orders, and Edgar was to follow his father's profession. For this was a household which held the view of duty, that no sacrifice was too great to give the boys a start in life, and money had been saved for their expenses almost ever since they were born. Mrs. Fordham was young looking, pretty, and graceful. She was a calm and even-tempered woman, who never failed her children, but was always the kind and careful mother on whom they expected to fall back. Dulcie was like her, save for the wistful, wondering eyes, which yet hardly seemed as if they could have been inherited from the stern, precise-looking father, whose every action followed a rule of duty and order. Dulcie knew that her mother viewed enthusiasm of all sorts with some suspicion, and she did not know how much of it went to the formation and ful-

filment of the high ideal which her father strove so hard to reach himself, and enforced so strictly on others. The young Fordhams never heard a sharp word from their parents, yet they always asked favours with some diffidence, as now, when James begged to be allowed to invite the Leightons home on that afternoon. "They haven't been here for months, mamma," he said.

"I have no objection," said Mrs. Fordham. "They seem very nice fellows."

Dulcie was all one blush as she lingered as the boys ran off to school.

"Mamma," she said, "I was looking out of the window, and I heard what you and Mr. Beaumont were talking about."

"Did you, Dulcie? I am sorry for that, as I believe the Leightons' schoolfellows know nothing about it."

"Oh, I won't tell any one."

"Don't imagine that you are the solitary possessor of a secret," said Mrs. Fordham,

smiling. "The circumstances are well known, but are better not discussed."

"Mamma, don't you think that there'll be a family document discovered?"

"I don't see what good any document would do, and very likely the boys themselves think nothing about it."

"But, mamma, *one* would be a kind of cousin to us!"

"It is not a connection I should wish to revive," said Mrs. Fordham, repressively.

Dulcie said no more, but the mysterious, half-understood story seized on her active imagination, and she invented every possible way in which the secret could be discovered. She could not quite divest herself of the notion that the wrong Leighton was the villain of the piece, and yet on the whole the feeling of the advantage of belonging to the Osgoods had the upper hand, and the interesting excitement of discovering a long-lost relation.

Dulcie Fordham was a born castle-builder ; she possessed the perilous golden gift, and it did not need so exciting a story as that of the Leightons to give food to her flights of fancy. She was strictly and exclusively brought up, and very regularly taught : but her lessons were old-fashioned lessons, easy in the sense that they did not strain her powers, and rather dry, as no attempt was made to make them interesting. She did them tolerably well, and was reproved when she fell short in them ; but there was no hurry in her life, and little excitement, and her mind had space to grow in its own way. She had no gymnasium or lawn tennis to occupy her play-hours, only a little mild croquet, so she had leisure to wander about the old garden till she knew the bend of every branch and the colour of every stone, to swing herself up and down in the old swing in the elms, connecting all sorts of fancies with the float

upwards into the sun-flecked green and down again to earth, to lie on her back on the turf and stare up at the clouds chasing each other over her head, to leave her soul open to the impressions of the things around her. For she was only thirteen, and there was nothing in her happy life of which she was afraid to let herself think.

Dulcie did not do sums so well, nor learn French grammar much better than many other girls do, yet she had in her mind a vague sense of superior powers. She produced the sense in others, and was often told how much better she might do if she tried. And yet she could not. She made brilliant remarks sometimes, and she looked intelligent; she had uncommon sensations, feelings and fancies—in short, the temperament of genius, without, as yet, having shown any special faculty above her fellows. She knew, without thinking of it, that in her there dwelt a spirit different to that of her

fellows, and she rejoiced in its possession. But she was a humble and simple-minded girl, kind-hearted in spite of the unconscious selfishness of a dreamy temperament, and quite free from self-assertion, easily crushed and rendered tearful by her little troubles, and as readily forgetting them again, but with nothing within urging her to rebellion against them or setting her at war with her surroundings, which she took entirely for granted.

Captain Fordham trained his children on principles of military obedience, the family laws were as the laws of the Medes and Persians, and though the family standard of education was not a very extreme one, such lessons as were imposed were never excused nor delayed; the religious duties required were very simple and few as compared with modern practice, but they were never omitted; to be late for prayers was a crime, not to go to church on Sunday, unless in case of

illness, an impossibility. Dress was to be very plain, and companions were scarce, and very carefully chosen. The family hardly ever went away from home, and only received a few regular visitors. Story books were few, and novels, except the *Waverleys*, forbidden. But, these rules observed, Dulcie had much time and much liberty, and no more thought of fretting at the unvarying laws than at the change of the seasons.

Her reverie on the present occasion was broken by the clock striking nine. Miss Hay would be there in a minute, and Dulcie flew up to the little white-panelled schoolroom, with its shabby furniture and pretty window, half-covered with creepers. Roses and ink, French exercises and blue sky, mingled in after years in Dulcie's recollections of the old schoolroom. There were canaries and squirrels, singing and scraping and twirling; there was a cactus,

about as big as a hazel-nut, which never grew, and a musk plant that did; there were flowers, and bead mats, and little ornaments and little pictures stuck about, for Dulcie loved the prettinesses of life, and ornamented her surroundings. The sun streamed in on a carpet long past fading, and on eyes that had not yet begun to ache, as Dulcie ran out to meet her governess—a good-natured little woman, much fonder of her pupil herself than of her studies.

The morning's work went on easily and peaceably. Dulcie said her lessons, and read her French, and found intervals to stare at the blue sky and the golden boughs of the laburnums, without meeting with any reproof; but, as twelve o'clock struck, her mother came into the room, and Miss Hay leant back with half a sigh, and looked at her idle pupil, whose book was shut on the very stroke, and her eyes wandering out into the sunshine.

"Well, Miss Hay," said Mrs. Fordham, "have you told Dulcie of our little arrangement?"

"Oh, no. What arrangement, mamma?" cried Dulcie, eagerly.

"Miss Hay thinks that more progress would be made with French and music, if you saw how other girls get on; and she is going to take you every week to Oxley Manor, to have some lessons from the resident teachers there."

"Oh—oh! How delightful!" cried Dulcie, dancing on her toes.

"As you know, Dulcie, papa would never let you go to school, but I think the classes, in addition to Miss Hay's teaching, will be a great advantage to you."

"Oh, I couldn't go to school and learn altogether of any one else," cried Dulcie, with a hug to her governess; "but when we went to the Dysarts' party, last winter, Miss Florence Venning was there, and she

did play games so cleverly, and was so nice. I shall like to go to the Manor."

Dulcie rushed off into the garden, so full of her new start in life that she almost forgot the interest of the Leightons' story. She was still a "little girl," on the other side of that sudden start which comes to girls in the earlier years of their teens, and puts youth in the place of childhood; and she thought a good deal more of the sight of other girl-faces than of the instruction by which she was to profit. She was running along the garden path, her face beaming with happy anticipations, when she heard her brothers' voices at the gate.

"Oh, Jem!" cried she, "what do you think? I am going to Oxley Manor to learn music and French." Then, becoming aware of their companions, she paused, and blushed a little, as her last night's discovery rushed back upon her mind.

Dulcie Fordham was so much more

childish than their own sister May, or than the girls with whom she associated, and was moreover allowed to be so little with them, that she had never counted for much in the eyes of the Leightons when they visited Fairfield; though now, the always good-natured Alick took up her remark, and when her brothers declared that she would be too shy to speak, and that the other girls would laugh at her, began to relate the satisfaction derived by his sister from certain French classes which she attended.

"When you are in a class," said Dulcie, "don't you feel as if you *wanted* to answer very much—even if one was afraid?"

"Well, no," said Alick; "I think, on the whole, I'd as soon some one else did."

"Every one isn't such a lazy-bones as you," said Jem Fordham.

"Nor such a wooden head as you, Beeches," returned Alick, pleasantly.

"Beeches" being the school nick-name of the two Fordhams, in allusion to the coincidence of their name with the place after which the famous Fordham Beeches were called.

"I assure you," struck in Geoffrey, "that good work always tells. If your lessons are properly prepared you get the credit in the long run, even if you feel passed over at the moment."

Dulcie glanced from one to the other, perceiving the difference in their sentiments, and noting curiously the difference in their appearance, which was as marked as ever.

Alick was a very big fellow, long-limbed and tall. He had heavy features and a sallow complexion, with soft, sleepy, long-lashed dark eyes, and a pleasant smile. Geoffrey, on the other hand, was only of average height, and very slim, with delicate, regular features, and pink and white colouring, almost girlishly pretty, set off by

curly hair, of a tint fully justifying his school-boy nick-name of "Carrots." But his grey eyes were bright and keen, and he had a thoroughly manly air of vigour and enterprise.

He had much more manner than Alick, and his way of making conversation on London topics always amused Captain Fordham on the occasional visits, which, as time went on, became somewhat more frequent, and led to an acquaintanceship between the families on the occasion of Mr. and Mrs. Leighton coming to stay with the head master and bringing May, so that Dulcie was thus provided with a friend. Her other acquaintances were the grandchildren of General Osgood, on their holiday visits to Willingham, and some few of the girls whom she met at her French classes. Her model, and the object of her unbounded hero-worship, was the bright-faced, handsome Miss Florence Venning, who had always a kind word for her.

CHAPTER V.

“WHEN ALICK WAS YOUNG.”

“I steal by lawns and grassy plots,
I slide by hazel covers,
I move the sweet forget-me-nots
That grow for happy lovers.”

GEOFFREY LEIGHTON'S school career was increasingly creditable and successful. He rose early to the head of the school, and did his part well in all the matters of school government and school discipline that fell to his share. He was not habitually very kind to Alick, whose difficulties he regarded as entirely his own fault; and Alick, as far as so good-humoured a person could be, was often worried by the sense of Geoffrey's point of view. With all others, Alick, in his eighteenth year, was very popular. He

was agreeable, and could say funny things and speak to the point. He was good-tempered, and tolerant of differences in his companions, and so was acceptable in various sets. He liked talking about intellectual pursuits, though he did not engage in them with much vigour. If he had a line of his own it was boating, but he did not stick closely enough to it for any heroic success. He was growing up to a sort of good looks from his size and a certain air of good breeding, though the only charm to be specified lay in his big insinuating eyes, which were handsome and could be very expressive. He was rather idle and rather extravagant, and without doing anything especially wrong, never seemed to take much pains with his life, and yet he inspired a certain respect, being entirely truthful and honourable. Alick never thought about these virtues, one way or the other, though he probably knew that

even among public-school boys they are not absolutely universal. If he exercised his conscience, it was on the amount of reading that he ought to get through, or on the very few coins to be found in his waist-coat pocket, or on certain endeavours not to unfit himself for the profession to which he looked forward, that of Holy Orders.

Alick spent many half-holidays on the river. He liked the easy motion and the picturesque scenery. Jem Fordham and Charles Osgood would sometimes be his companions, but more often he went alone, and his favourite course was down the river to Bridgehurst, a pretty village beyond Redhurst, with a long, low, grey church peeping out of wide oak copses. The river here wound through sunny meadows and heathery commons, and was crossed near the church by an old stone bridge, which gave its name to the village. One Saturday afternoon he was rowing

slowly towards the bridge, on the other side of which was the landing stage. It was the summer term, and long outings were allowed. The swallows were darting about over the water, the children's voices sounded at play in the village. A group of girls were standing on the bridge laughing and talking together. One, with long fair hair hanging down beneath a broad straw hat, was leaning over the edge of the bridge, and dangling a bunch of flowers in her hand. The fair hair shone and glittered in the sunshine and caught Alick's attention. As he rowed slowly underneath the bridge, he looked up, and the little bunch of honeysuckle, whether by accident or design, dropped from her hand and fell into the boat. The girl drew back with a start and a half-suppressed laugh, and Alick shot through the arches, moored up his boat all in a hurry, and ran up the steps on to the bridge with the honeysuckle in his

hand. Several girls and children were crossing it carrying baskets of flowers, and the owner of the honeysuckles stood a little apart from the rest. She wore a shabby, childishly made black frock, and her straw hat showed sharply-cut, youthful features, and the glittering shining hair falling down to her waist. She was looking straight before her, *past* the steps, and though the colour mounted into her face as Alick approached, she pretended not to see him till he came up to her, lifted his cap, and said politely :

"I believe you dropped these flowers?"

"Oh, thank you," she said; "I was looking at the swallows, and I let them fall."

She spoke abruptly, and did not give any encouragement to Alick to continue the conversation, but walked rapidly away from him.

"She spoke like a lady," thought Alick,

“but she was hardly civil enough. If she *didn't* mean to throw them down, she might have taken it more as a matter of course ; and if she *did*— But she didn't.”

Alick was no doubt an excellent judge, though he came to this conclusion with a slight sense of disappointment.

“What are you doing with your flowers?” he asked of another damsel, who did not look above being addressed.

“Decorating the church, if you please, sir. It's the school treat this afternoon, and we are going to church first, sir.”

“These are just for a finish, honeysuckle and ferns, sir.”

Alick possessed an interest in very small events. He liked studying human life ; he saw things in a picturesque and amusing light. The school feast in this little sunlit village, the gathering rush of merry children, the pealing bells, and the sense of rural festivity, pleased him as if he had

been on a tour in a foreign country. It did not occur to him to think that a school treat must be goody and a bore. He thought that the collecting of the children was a pretty sight, but was hanging back, conscious of his boating flannels, when the clergyman, a Mr. Royland, who, before taking this living, had acted as one of the under masters in the school, came up behind him.

"What, Alick Leighton! Well met! Come and help us; we're sorely in want of some one to start the cricket."

"My boating flannels, sir," said Alick; "I mustn't come into church, must I?"

"Oh, yes, you may. There'll be such a crowd that no one will see you."

Alick followed willingly. The little church was bright and cheerful with very unsophisticated flowery wreaths, and with the gay summer dresses of the congregation. The children sang the hymns and

canticles, and what they wanted in skill they made up in energy. The sunshine streamed in through the unstained windows, through which blue sky and waving boughs might be seen. Alick thought the effect pleasant and rural, though it was a very modern Arcadia, with all the newest fashion in hats and bonnets to set off the cheerful faces of the village maidens.

Alick saw the lady of the honeysuckles sitting at the end of a row of little girls, with the sunshine lighting up her golden locks.

As they all came out of church, his friend of the bridge passed him with a smile of recognition.

"Who is that young lady with the light hair and white hat?" said Alick.

The little girl, to whom he spoke, looked about, and then answered, "Miss Jenkins, sir, at the Swan."

"Oh," said Alick. He looked at the pic-

turesque old inn as they walked up to the rectory field, and saw that one side of it was covered with a great overhanging honeysuckle in full flower.

He soon discovered "Miss Jenkins" in the field, in the midst of the troop of girls and children, and as he applied himself to the regulation of the boys' cricket he saw her, with the corner of his eye, playing with all her might and main, running in pursuit of her companions over the new-cut hay, through the blazing sunshine, winding herself up into the very centre of "oranges and lemons," and spinning round at the tail of "hen and chickens."

Tea brought the two parties together, and the maiden of the honeysuckle coloured and smiled recognition as Alick offered to fill her jug of tea, and half-a-dozen words were exchanged at intervals.

"You are fond of honeysuckles," said Alick, seeing that she wore some in her hat.

She looked as if she wanted to laugh, but restrained the impulse and the retort that evidently trembled on the tip of her tongue.

"They're very sweet," she said, rather abruptly.

"You have a beautiful bush of them in your garden," hazarded Alick.

"No," she said, surprised. "These come from the Swan. Mrs. Jenkins brought them to my aunt this morning. You can see them from the street."

"You can!" thought Alick, thankful that he had not committed himself further, and feeling foolish enough to be glad to turn away with his can of tea.

"Didn't you tell me that was Miss Jenkins?" he said to the girl whom he had before questioned.

"Which, sir? There is Miss Jenkins, with the light hair, sir," showing a damsel with hair even more glittering and conspicuous than the honeysuckle maiden, but

different enough in style to cause Alick to answer—

"No, no. I meant that young lady with the buns."

"Ah," said Mr. Royland, hearing the remark; "isn't she an active little thing? She is a niece of Lady Anne Macdonald. Rather a sad story. Her father was old Lord Glenfern's youngest son, and she lives here with her aunt at the cottage. Left without a farthing, and without the education of one of these school children. Well, is your time up? Much obliged for your help, my dear fellow. My schoolmaster's a muff on these occasions."

Alick went off to his boat and rowed home in a hurry, but the little incident with which their acquaintance had begun, and the mistake that had taken place, riveted his attention on Annie Macdonald and made him wish to see her again, when he found that she was no

village belle, but "a penniless lass with a long pedigree," with no right to show her pretty face out of the schoolroom for two good years to come, only that she had no schoolroom to hide it in, nor any of the advantages proper to her rank.

The child of a spendthrift younger son of a poor Scotch peer, she had early acquired an extravagant sense of her own pretensions, as well as too much knowledge of the difficulties of supporting them. She had seen a good deal of a certain sort of life before her parents died, and at thirteen she came to live with her aunt at Bridgehurst. Lady Anne Macdonald was poor, and so far resembled her brother ; but she had never owed a penny in her life, and Annie thought the quiet, consistent hardships of the life she led, many of which were made necessary by the charge of her niece, infinitely more dreary than the stolen pleasures and occasional treats, which were

paid for by weeks of real want and difficulty. Annie had formed certain definite views of life, and did not like her own, but nature had gifted her with an abundance of high spirits; the school treat cost nothing, and could be properly patronised by the descendant of the Macdonalds. How she enjoyed "being so kind as to play with the children"; and when she had found out who Alick was, and that her honeysuckles had not been picked up by a clerk from Oxley, she thought she had made a pleasant acquaintance.

She was very hot with her vigorous games, and her gown was pulled out of the gathers by the time the treat was over, but she shook hands with a grand air as she wished good night, and told Mr. Royland that she thought the feast had gone off admirably—it was very well managed indeed.

Happily she did not discover that she

had been mistaken for Miss Jenkins at the Swan.

Alick rowed back slowly, thinking over the pleasant scene that he had just quitted; then heard the 7.10 train whistle, and knew that he was late, as he came to the landing; ran like the wind to the grammar school gates, and arrived there just late enough to get a severe rebuke and an imposition.

"Where on earth have you been dawdling?" said young Osgood afterwards, "At Bridgehurst—at a school treat! Well, there's no accounting for tastes. Here's my mater been writing to me to go and call on her cousin, Lady Anne Macdonald, who lives there, if ever I have the chance. You had better show me the way."

"So I will," said Alick; "that's a bargain." And he was so much amused at the coincidence that he undertook his imposition quite cheerfully, and forgot his rebuke.

CHAPTER VI.

MY LIFE, AND WHAT SHALL I DO WITH IT?

“The old order changeth, giving place to the new.”

LADY ANNE MACDONALD lived in a small cottage on the outskirts of Bridgehurst. She had one faithful old servant, who had come with her from Glenfern, and who did her best to keep up the refined stateliness of her lady's surroundings ; but though Lady Anne had some very pretty filagree silver and some very valuable china cups, she was forced to live hardly and plainly. She possessed some yards of old lace which might well have been exhibited at South Kensington, beautiful shawls, and a few jewels—her share as the daughter of a great house ; but she was forced to wear carmelite and alpaca, and to practise a strict economy in extra fires and little comforts.

Lady Anne Macdonald was understood not to go into society—indeed she would never have thought of the expense of a fly ; but all the county ladies drove in to call on her, and those of lesser degree hesitated to intrude unless she signified through Mrs. Royland her willingness to receive their visits. She was a very good woman, with the sort of reactionary high principle sometimes produced in families which have suffered much from want of principle, and she hated debt and dishonour. She had made in her life once a great decision, and she tried ever after to live up to it, and perhaps to justify it, in detail. She had refused an offer from a man of great wealth but of no family, on the double ground that she did not love him, and that she thought the modern habit of considering that wealth could buy oblivion for a low origin utterly degrading.

“Having no affection for him,” she said

once, "I hope I should have refused him even if his father had been a gentleman; being who he was, I would not have accepted him even if I had been weak enough to care for him."

Such was her rendering of *Noblesse oblige*, and she did not consider that a lady of rank ought to abrogate her dignity in the slightest degree for any pleasure or advantage, and certainly never to stoop to any unbecoming action. Better lead a dull life than know second-rate people, better go without comforts than accept favours, better live on a little than increase your income either by engaging in any contest for a livelihood with people of inferior station, or by any marriage but one perfectly suitable to family claims, and also one of affection; which last clause added the salt of romance to the other somewhat worldly and very impracticable sentiments.

Lady Anne had seen a great deal of

trouble, but she was by no means a melancholy person ; she approved of her own life, and was accustomed to its restrictions. The present Lord Glenfern was a child, and the property would have time to recover itself during his long minority ; but in spite of the advantage of a comfort for her declining years, and the interest of watching her niece's development—all of which views of the subject were set forward by her friends—it may be doubted whether she was much the happier for Annie's presence.

Annie was an odd girl, and had very decided views of life of her own ; but they clashed with her aunt's and with each other. She was quite as proud as Lady Anne, but not nearly so ready to submit to dulness and solitude. She liked companionship and play and pleasure ; she knew that in a year or two's time she would like society, and that she would

not have it; she knew that she was very ignorant. Lady Anne preferred ignorance to schools where there was “a mixture,” and was not an intellectual woman herself.

Annie, however, was clever in a way, and would have liked to learn. Moreover, she had several, not exactly stolen acquaintances—for acquaintanceship was acknowledged—but stolen intimacies, with girls in the immediate neighbourhood, and acquaintances in plenty, which had no chance of being intimacies, with her aunt’s more distant friends. So, as she said to herself, she knew a good deal of life.

There was a little strip of garden along the front of Lady Anne’s cottage—the cottage had no name; Lady Anne thought that names for cottages had a suburban air and were not needed, since every one in Bridgehurst knew where she lived—and here, on a bench, sat Annie on the Wednesday afternoon after the school treat. A

decorous and neatly clipped hawthorn hedge shut out the view of the road, and behind this screen the tall figure of Lady Anne, in a mushroom hat, might be seen moving about among the gay little flower-beds, for she was fond of gardening and took great pleasure in the pursuit.

Annie had a volume of Pinnock's *Rome* on her lap. She read history and French every day out of her aunt's old lesson books; but just now she was not reading, but thinking. Not dreaming — Annie's bright, keen grey eyes were always wide awake—and though she was thinking about her future life, she was not building airy castles, as might have been natural to a girl of sixteen on a sunny morning. Annie was acute and matter-of-fact, and prided herself on it.

"There are only two ways in which I can escape being like Aunt Anne," thought she. "And I sha'n't even have as much a

year as she has ; she can't leave it all to me—she told me so. If I get married? That's very hard for girls of rank without any money. I'll *never* marry any one who isn't my equal, and I don't think I'm likely to know people that are. I know how it'll be ; I shall be asked about now and then for balls. But it's only in novels that young men find out where you live and come and call the next day, and that one looks prettier in old Indian muslin than all the fine ladies. I don't believe that Aunt Anne's old Indian muslin would look well at all—it's limp and dismal. And I'm not going to be a beauty, especially with bad clothes and not knowing exactly the right way to do one's hair. There's one thing I know, and that is I'll never marry a man who drinks or gambles, or goes in for racing. No ! I don't think I mind about being in love, but I will esteem him. And he shall not have made his fortune in

trade! Oh, Aunt Anne's right there—it is low and mean to overlook vulgarity because people are rich. But there, it's twenty chances to one against his turning up, and I shall go on and be an Aunt Anne!"

Annie sighed deeply, and almost gave up her meditations and returned to Whitaker's Pinnock's Goldsmith's *Rome* instead. But as she read half a page she paused again.

"There it is! I know nothing at all. I can't sing, nor draw, nor chatter French like girls with grand governesses. I am afraid I'm too ignorant *even* for society, and I couldn't earn half a farthing a year as a governess! Now should I like being a governess better than being like aunt Anne? and is it worth while giving up *that other little bit of a chance for it?* I've no time to lose. If I make up my mind I'll make Aunt Anne consent. Things are different now-a-days, I should like, I think,

‘to move with the spirit of the age,’ as Agnes Royland said.”

Annie’s sharp little face took an air of careful consideration. She had a plan in her head, but she was not sure of her own adhesion to it. She was afraid to burn her ships, and sat balancing the *pros* and *cons* of her scheme of life, one against the other, till Lady Anne came up to her and sat down by her side. She was on a larger scale than Annie, with a more decided air of distinction, and less pretension to prettiness.

“My dear,” she said, “I have been thinking that my Sunday gown will serve me very well for this summer, and I could manage to buy you the white alpaca that you wanted for best.”

“Aunt Anne,” said Annie, “I hate skimping and contriving.”

She was too much her aunt’s child to have scruples about the sacrifice made for

her; it was the general sense of poverty and discomfort that oppressed her.

"There's no shame in poverty, Annie," said Lady Anne. "Your position doesn't depend on your clothes."

"No shame," returned the girl, "but a great deal of disagreeableness and bother. Aunt Anne, I should like to go to school. I don't learn anything."

"Ah, my dear," said Lady Anne, "it is a pity that you cannot. I think a year at a finishing school a very good thing for a young lady. But the cost of the Miss Bentleys' in London, where our family have generally been sent, is quite out of the question."

"Oxley Manor is a very nice school," said Annie.

"Yes. I might have allowed you to go to Oxley Manor; but I couldn't afford even that. I must try and get you a few singing lessons before you are eighteen."

Annie held Pinnock's *Rome* tight in both hands.

"Every one doesn't pay full terms at Oxley Manor," she said.

"You are not proposing to lay yourself under such an obligation?"

"No! They do something—they teach the little ones, and then they are taught themselves."

"My dear!" exclaimed Lady Anne, "What are you talking about? Do you think I should allow my niece to take such a position? To be a miserable drudge, to eat the crusts, and do the dirty work, and be despised by the girls!"

"Oh no, auntie. That's only in silly stories. That's quite an old-fashioned idea. It's not at all so at the Manor. Everything there is most modern and enlightened."

"Indeed!" said Lady Anne drily; but Annie had found her tongue.

“Aunt Anne, I’m sixteen, and there’s no time to lose, if I am ever to learn anything. If I went to school in that way for two years I might come back and be just a young lady afterwards, or I might—Aunt Anne, I’m nearly sure that I would rather be a governess than scrape along on nothing all my life. I’ve considered, and I don’t think I should consider it degrading. But any way ignorance is always at a disadvantage.”

“Who told you that?” said Lady Anne, felling sure that she listened to a quotation.

“Every one thinks so,” said Annie. “Please auntie, don’t be angry, but you see girls without any money don’t often get married, and if I had two years’ schooling I should be much fitter for anything that might turn up.”

“Get married?” said Lady Anne; “a girl of your age has no business to think about getting married.”

“They do think—sometimes,” said Annie. You forget, Aunt Anne, that I didn’t begin my life here. I know—a good deal. And there are some things that I’ll never do. I’ll never have anything to do with unsteady or extravagant people. I’d rather be like you, auntie, than that. Of course I should like best to come out and go to balls and to town for the season. But I can’t. And I think it’s more sensible to earn a little more money than to be very uncomfortable for the want of it.”

Annie spoke in short sentences, conscious of “naughtiness” in opposing her aunt. She was a self-possessed girl, not given to tears, or spurts of temper; and having delivered her soul of these long-considered sentiments, she awaited the answer in silence.

Lady Anne was very much astonished. She was not a reflective person, nor given to the study of character. As long as

Annie behaved well, and appeared healthy and cheerful, she was quite satisfied with the results of her system.

It struck her now that the worldly wisdom which Annie had expressed, was at variance with her years. A girl of sixteen had no business to speculate on her chances of marriage ; and no one likes to hear their own career considered distasteful, however much they may be aware of the drawbacks to it.

“My dear Annie,” she said rather formally, “the circumstances of our family are very unfortunate. If little Glenfern’s long minority saves the estate, it is all we can hope for. I cannot give you any of the pleasures or advantages which you might like, but I can keep you from any unsuitable line of action. I think neither pleasure, nor money, nor even the education you think so much of, ought to be pursued by ladies, if they sacrifice any sort of pro-

priety to it. Nothing is worth it. And, in our station, many things are impossible that might suit Miss Royland, if she needed to earn money. Don't confound these restraints with pride, my dear. The slightest feeling of contempt for those differently placed from ourselves is un-Christian. It is not pride—it is duty."

"Ladies do so many things now—they write books and give lectures," said Annie.

"I do not suppose, my dear, that a *lady* would receive any money for a book, if she did write one," said Lady Anne, with unintentional satire; "and as for lectures—I hope I shall never hear one. No, Annie, I could never allow such a thing. There is no hardship I would not endure sooner than see you enter the ranks of women earning their bread. Again, don't mistake me, it is most praiseworthy in those that are called to it; but, to struggle against inferiors—to submit to public criti-

cism—to be *employed*—— You must see the impropriety of it.”

“But suppose we had *no* money at all?” said Annie.

“My dear, good families, however straitened, rarely permit such an extremity.”

Annie was silent for a minute, and then said: “Well, Auntie, I can’t do it without your leave; the Miss Vennings wouldn’t have me; but I think you are mistaken, and that it will be hard on me by and bye. I shouldn’t care for the education any more than you do, if I was quite sure of the future.”

“Dear me, Annie, how can you say I don’t care for education? I had an excellent governess, and practised three hours a-day. I wish you would, instead of suggesting impossibilities. Besides, you can study by yourself, you have plenty of time.”

“Yes, but I hate study,” said Annie, with apparent inconsistency; though in

truth the spur of teaching and companionship is more needed by a mind without any natural taste for learning, than by an intellectual girl who can help herself.”)

She was not keenly disappointed at being checked in her efforts after a career; she rather felt as if she had done a duty to herself; and that now what might happen in the future, was not her fault. She knew that more words would be useless, and was not of a temperament to find useless words a relief to her feelings.

In the afternoon Charles Osgood called on Lady Anne, bringing with him Alick Leighton, whom he introduced as his college friend and old acquaintance. Lady Anne was a pleasant, cheerful-mannered woman, and she liked pleasant and well-mannered young men. She made them welcome, showed Charles a black shade of their common relation, did the honours of her little parlour, and flattered them by appealing to

their taste as to its decoration. "This little table-cover—oh, it was very cheap, only one-and-sevenpence a yard—but was it the *right* colour? She was only an old woman, *quite* unenlightened and inartistic, but still she should like to know?"

She made herself so agreeable that Annie had hardly a chance to get a word in edgewise. Not that she shut the girl out from *malice prepense*, but she had that innate love of society and conversation that no solitude can kill; it was the greatest pleasure to her to make herself agreeable. The two boys were delighted; and, instead of hurrying away from a tiresome duty, remained to enjoy the raspberries and cups of tea which she offered them; listened to the whole pedigree of the curly sugar tongs which Alick had ventured artistically to admire, and finally accepted eagerly her permission to come again.

Annie's words had not been without

effect. Willingham was quite a suitable house for Annie to visit at, and at the same time was quiet, out of the ordinary run of great houses, and would involve her in no expensive amusements and require no impossible toilets. Moreover, the education question, once suggested, did not pass away from her mind. It was quite true that Annie was too ignorant, and Lady Anne resolved on a line of action most disagreeable to her own feelings.

Her only sister had not shared her strong views, either as to equality of birth or romantic passion in marriage. She had married a man much older than herself, who possessed some very profitable dye works in the north of England. Lady Julia Woodford did not find her marriage stand much in her light with any one but her sister, who was glad to avail herself of the fact of distance to excuse a separation almost as complete as if there had been a

formal breach between them. Some offers of assistance had been made when Annie was first left an orphan, but had been declined by Lady Anne. Now, however, with a self-conquest that did her some credit, she wrote to her sister, and explained the difficulties that stood in the way of Annie's education, and the answer was kinder than Lady Anne deserved, for Lady Julia undertook to give Annie at least two years at school, and made a request that could not now be disregarded, that she should be allowed to visit her in the holidays.

So Annie went to Oxley Manor to school, and there at the French classes she met Dulcie Fordham, and, their common connection with the Osgoods forming a link, the two girls struck up a friendship for each other. They also met occasionally in the holidays at Willingham, when the London grandchildren were an excuse for summer picnics and Christmas dances.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FRENCH UNCLE.

“ We’ll have a speech straight.
Come, give us a taste of your quality ; come,
a passionate speech.”

ON a cold morning in the Christmas holidays after Annie Macdonald was sent to school, Miss Florence Venning sat in the drawing-room at Oxley Manor reading the following letter :

“ WILLINGHAM HALL,
“ *December 29th*, 18—.

“ MY DEAR MISS VENNING,—I am writing to ask you if you can spare us a week of your holidays, and if you will undertake a great deal of trouble at my grandchildren’s earnest request. You must forgive me for being anxious to indulge them. Effie and

Charlie are crazy to get up some acting this Christmas, and, as we wish to give them a party, and Effie is too young for a ball and too old for children's amusements, the idea is not a bad one. The other boys are not smitten with the same mania; but Charlie declares that his friend Geoffrey Leighton has quite a talent for acting—so we think of asking him to spend a week here with his brother and sister. Our young cousins, the Fordhams, would be of the party, and I thought also of asking little Annie Macdonald. These are our resources; but you see they are all almost children together, as my daughter-in-law very properly dislikes the admission of strangers to the scheme, and they want a head to guide them. They all declare that no one could help them so well as Miss Florence Venning, and, indeed, we all remember the treat you gave us last year at the Manor. So if you do not mind the

trouble of helping the young ones, and will join us from the 5th to the 12th, we shall *all* be charmed to see you.

“With kind regards to your sister, believe me,

“Very sincerely yours,

“ELIZABETH OSGOOD.”

Florence Venning laid the letter down, and considered how far her time from the 5th to the 12th was at her own disposal, whether the week was clear from parochial teas and treats, and from more private engagements. For Florence at five-and-twenty was a very busy and rather important person, and had won by her talents and energy a position somewhat in advance of her years.

She had very early shown that she had the power to improve and extend her sister's already very successful school, and every one knew that the ease and skill with

which the Manor adapted itself to modern requirements without losing any former advantages was due to the enterprise and tact of the youngest Miss Venning. Moreover, her sister Clarissa used to say that Florence possessed the "enthusiasm of humanity as applied exclusively to girls," and, indeed, she had a wonderful power of attracting and influencing them, and a taste for them so strong that even her professional training could not damp it or make it mechanical. Even her sister's pupils did not satisfy her; she had a Sunday class, and a society for self-improvement, besides innumerable friends of her own age and younger. She wrote tales for them in her leisure moments, delightful at least to her own public, and profitable enough to give her extra pocket-money to expend on her various schemes. She corresponded with old governesses and old girls, and as she gained age and experience found more and

more work to do for them. She had little to force her thoughts away from them. The school was too well established for serious money anxieties ; her second sister, Clarissa, who had never liked school keeping, had gone to keep house for a widowed brother, and the eldest was still in the prime of life and energy.

The Misses Venning were of good family, and had lived all their lives in Oxley, and held a position hitherto rather unusual with professional ladies. Florence was a tall, stately young woman, with blooming cheeks and a fine, open brow, crowned by an abundance of flaxen hair. She was handsomer at five-and-twenty than in earlier youth, when she had had something of a bouncing girl look, and as she was a perfectly unaffected person and very sociable, she was popular in society and thoroughly enjoyed it. Her chief friends were the Spencer Crichtons of Redhurst. For, years

ago, when she was still herself a school-girl, her favourite companion had been Mysie Crofton, Mr. Crichton's cousin and ward, whose tragical death in early youth, and with the brightest prospects opening before her, had been Florence's first experience of personal sorrow. All connected with Mysie was thenceforth sacred to her, and though the flowers had long grown on her grave, though the young lover whose heart had been half broken by her loss was far away, and Redhurst was a cheerful house once more, for Florence it shone for ever in the light of a special tenderness, while the whole sorrowful story was whispered about among the Manor House girls with peculiar interest. The Crichtons had afforded another romance to Oxley Manor, for, some five years ago, a young Italian girl had spent a few months there as governess-pupil, and had won much affection from Miss Florence. Her history, and her mar-

riage with Mr. Spencer Crichton of the Bank, have been already recorded elsewhere, and are only here referred to because her intimate friendship with Florence Venning gave the latter special interests apart from her school life, and had been the means of her introduction to the Osgoods of Willingham. Young Mrs. Crichton was always afraid that Florence would grow too busy and too learned, and coaxed her into all sorts of holiday gaieties. Florence was fond of acting and of making others act, and it was with decided satisfaction that she settled with herself that she was free to accept the invitation; and accordingly, on the day named, she presented herself at Willingham, and was seized upon at once by the eager boys and girls, who had all arrived the day before, and dragged into the library to hear the plans.

Willingham was a fine old house of a sober, dignified kind. When General and

Mrs. Osgood were there alone nothing went on but a daily drive and an occasional dinner-party. Their daughters and their younger sons were settled far away, but the eldest, who was in the War Office, and lived in London, brought his large family twice a year to Willingham, and General Osgood's youngest brother, who was fellow and tutor of his college, came every Christmas, and did all that was expected of a bachelor uncle when he tipped the boys and complimented the young ladies. He used to shelter himself in a little study from their clatter and chatter, and take long strolling walks and rides by himself; but at meal times and in the evening he was always the pink of courtesy, and put himself to some trouble to take kindly notice of Alick and Geoffrey Leighton, attention which the latter instantly perceived—and resented.

Geoffrey, although as he grew up he had come to think much less of the mystery

connected with him, never heartily liked coming to Willingham ; but he was at a stage of great delight in society, and would go anywhere for a dance or a play. Alick was less sociable ; but home was perhaps less charming than usual, for his place in the school was not satisfactory, and though he had much fewer pursuits and tastes than Geoffrey, he spent a good deal more money, and never succeeded in making his allowance do. All this made a little change desirable, and they gladly joined the party of merry young people whose impossible ideas Florence was to reduce to order.

They were but boys and girls, but they afforded a great many types of society. Effie Osgood, with an air of fashion and of the great world, self-confident and enterprising ; May Leighton, well used also, according to her age, to society and its ways, but with an extra dash of intellectualism, and more knowledge of life outside the school-room ;

Dulcie, bashful, diffident, all smiles and blushes, too eager and clever to hold herself back, but terribly afraid of herself when she found herself the centre of attraction. How frightened she was before each rehearsal—frightened almost to tears when her turn came to begin, and then forgetting all in the delight of the performance, and the consciousness of her own success. Dulcie was full of impulses, which seemed all of equal force ; whatever she had in hand at the moment seemed to absorb her whole being, and really almost to change her identity, so that she was sometimes a little stiff, unnoticeable school-girl, and sometimes a very sprite, all air and fire.

Like most young actors, they thought their audience could hardly have too much of a good thing ; so the *Jacobite*, chosen as Effie Osgood had romantic tastes, was to be succeeded by *A Game of Romps*, and by *Ici on Parle Français*, and Geoffrey, in-

comparably the best actor, was the villain, the old tutor, and the Frenchman. He was stage manager, and thoroughly in his element in coaching and ordering his troop.

Mrs. Osgood and her daughter-in-law thought to preserve the childish and simple character of the entertainment by insisting on all costumes and decorations being of home contrivance, the wigs only, as a great concession, being allowed to be hired from London.

The ladies' maids might help them. Miss Florence brought sufficient judgment to repress the impossible, and the girls sewed and contrived under her direction.

Alick, who filled a variety of small parts, was inducing May to ornament his costume of the lawyer in the *Game of Romps* with lace ruffles and a "steinkirk" made out of her own best necktie.

"The lawyer ought to be a gentlemanly sort of fellow, you see, May."

"Certainly—only if you tear my necktie you will have to get me another, because, you know, I buy my own, and this cost two and ninepence."

"Two and ninepence! Is that all? Girls' dress must be very cheap. My ties always cost at least seven and sixpence."

"Dear me, Alick! How careful you ought to be with them! I'm sure Fred and Geoff don't give so much for theirs."

"Well, you can't think how I lose my things. I don't know what becomes of them. Do look at those old fellows upon the wall. A pretty penny *their* clothes must have cost them. Plum-coloured velvet and gold, and no end of race ruffles!"

"Well, you know, they ruined themselves. Those are mostly the old Willinghams, who had to sell the place. So perhaps their coats were too handsome for their fortunes."

"Yes," said Effie Osgood, "but that little

black man in the corner is a great-uncle Osgood, who lived abroad, and so he looks like a Frenchman. But the others belong to us in a sort of way, for our great-grandmother was a Miss Willingham, and that made great-grandpapa think of buying the place."

The young people were sitting in the library during this colloquy, and had strewn the handsome old room with a mass of quaint and incongruous rubbish. Geoffrey, who was writing out a play-bill, looked up at the pictures for a moment, and then hastily down again at his writing, till he was interrupted by the rapid tap of high-heeled shoes, and in ran Dulcie, in scarlet petticoat and chintz bodice, crying out :

"Miss Florence has dressed me up, and wants to know if Effie thinks I shall do."

"Charming. Doesn't the dress inspire you? Oh, what fun!"

"I must run up to Miss Florence, and get

her to do mine ;” and amid fifty such exclamations the subject of the picture was not renewed.

The day of the performance was passed in the usual distracting whirl of bustle and mistakes, aggravated by the fearful fact of the wigs having never made their appearance, and by General Osgood objecting to sending the servants four miles on a frosty day to meet *every* train that came from London.

“What an amount of trouble we all give to Geoff!” observed Alick, sily, as his brother ordered and arranged and stage-managed, and consulted Miss Venning, and set the young ladies to rights with elaborate courtesy and the boys with determined self-assertion. Dulcie lost her book, and declared at the last moment that she had forgotten every word of her part.

“I shall never remember it, Miss Flossy, —never!” she cried, all flushed and

flurried, and ready to cry. "Oh, what will become of me?"

"Nonsense!" said Florence. "You knew it yesterday, and you'll remember it again in a minute. Effie looks well."

"Lovely! Oh dear, I can't help it! I can't begin."

"You should not be so self-conscious, Dulcie," said May Leighton, sententiously, and this dreadful accusation fairly reduced the excitable girl to tears, and threatened the success of the performance.

"Don't cry, Dulcie, or you'll set me off too. I'm in such an awful funk!" said Alick.

"I'll stand at the side and prompt you all through the first scene," said Geoffrey. "Don't you know great geniuses are always nervous beforehand. Macready was."

"Oh, Geoffrey, take care then *you* don't faint," cried Dulcie, diverted, and laughing through her tears.

"I? Oh, *I* have only a little talent," said Geoffrey, with becoming modesty, at which speech there was a universal shout, and Dulcie's eyes grew bright again, as everybody's feelings were forgotten at the entrance of a large box containing the much-desired wigs.

No need to dwell on all the humours of that never-forgotten night—a sweet and merry memory in years to come to all the happy young creatures who trod their mimic stage.

Melodrama took the lead, and "Lady Somerford's" high tragedy passed muster when helped out by Geoffrey's really clever acting and by Dulcie's sweet presentment of "Patty's" loyalty to her lady, and coquetry with her lover.

Then came the *Game of Romps*—a piece made to be played by pretty, half-grown girls, and the audience were delighted.

"So clever of the children." All shy-

ness and nervousness passed away before the hearty applause of admiring grandpapas and uncles, and with the confidence inspired by becoming dress and effectual disguise. The powdered wigs, provided for the two first pieces, set off the young faces in quite a new light ; while, 'of course, fronts and false whiskers were imperatively necessary to the comic effect of *Ici on parle Français*.

“What is Geoff about ?” said Charles Osgood, rushing on to the stage before this latter piece began. “Every one else is ready.”

“Getting himself up for the Frenchman. The black moustaches took a good deal of sticking,” replied Alick, arranging the carrotty whiskers which were assumed to represent the genteel letter of lodgings.

“What a fright you look, Alick !” said May, who was trying to simper suitably as “Angelina.”

"Geoff, Geoffrey, I say!" cried Edgar Fordham. "Time's up; make haste."

There was no answer; but in a moment Geoffrey dashed out of the library, where the finishing touches were given, upstairs into Charles Osgood's bedroom, where the boys had dressed, and then, before any one could follow him, was down and on the stage, in the Frenchman's dress, but with his own smooth face and reddish hair, undisguised.

"Why, where's your wig? and the beard and moustaches?" cried half a dozen voices.

"They won't do. I can't wear them," said Geoffrey, sharply and briefly. "Come, it's time to begin. I must do without them."

"Oh, what a dreadful pity!" cried Effie. "They were capital! They were just the shape of our old French uncle's. Do have a cork moustache, at least."

"It won't do with my hair," said Geoffrey, and he carried his point; but the few critics among the audience said that the Frenchman was stiff and tame, and a failure compared to Geoffrey Leighton's other performances.

But all the young hearts might be full of triumph as they came, in their own persons, in to supper, for they knew that they had had a success. Mr. Spencer Crichton complimented Geoffrey on his really superior acting, and Mrs. Stafford flattered him and claimed him as her cousin in a way that, from the head-master's wife, ought to have gratified him; but he responded shortly to both, and had none of his usual conversation at command. Dulcie, who had been certainly the greatest star among the maidens, blushed and retreated upon Miss Florence at Mrs. Stafford's too open praise, though she thought the head-master's wife by far the greatest lady in the

neighbourhood ; nor did she know how to answer when Dr. Osgood made her a super-fine bow, and told her the company was indebted to her.

“I don’t know what to say,” she whispered to Annie Macdonald.

“Oh,” returned Annie, “if one has any knowledge of society, one ought to be able to talk to any one.” And she set herself to be agreeable to the stiff, old-fashioned scholar with marked success.

Dulcie looked on surprised ; but she was quite content with talking to Miss Florence, and with looking at young Mrs. Crichton, whose gracious beauty, soft eyes, and sweet foreign tongue entirely fulfilled her girlish ideal of perfection.

“All was *perfect* except the Frenchman,” Charles Osgood said ; but the next morning, as he and Alick were packing up the wigs, the black beard and moustaches were nowhere to be found. They were just shut-

ting up the box without them when the footman came in, bringing a piece of charred hair.

“The housemaid, sir, found this in the grate in your bedroom,” he said.

“Why, Geoff must have pitched it into the fire !” exclaimed Charles in surprise.

Alick coloured deeply.

“Don’t say anything about it, Charlie,” he said. “I’ll stand the loss, and settle with Geoff afterwards.”



CHAPTER VIII.

THE CHOICE OF LIFE.

“A place in the ranks awaits you,
Each man has some part to play,
The Past and the Future are nothing
In the face of the stern To-day.”

THE approaching end of the school career of Alick and Geoffrey Leighton brought more perplexity and anxiety to their parents than they had often experienced in their prosperous life. There had indeed been some disappointment at finding that neither Fred's talents nor inclinations were suited to a learned profession, and that he would never follow in his father's steps; but this had been long known and prepared for. Fred was put into the office of a firm of old-established and highly-respected solicitors, and was working steadily

at his business, and at the necessary preliminary examinations. After all, it was nice to keep Fred at home. He would always be contented and comfortable, and would never be the cause of any real anxiety.

"And then you know, father," he had said, "there's Geoff. There's nothing he won't be able to do at school and college. I think he's as clever as you were."

"Geoff is a better scholar than I was at his age," said Mr. Leighton, with a gratified look. "Certainly he may have a very brilliant career, and he is not idle either."

"Oh, no, he's a trump at hard work!" said Fred.

"I wish Alick was," said Mr. Leighton. "Alick has the wits, if he likes to use them."

"Well, Alick's a bit lazy," reluctantly admitted Fred; "but he is such a good-natured chap. He'll never be such a swell

as Geoff, of course, but he'll do well enough in his own way."

If, during the next two years, Fred saw reason to doubt this happy augury, he said nothing to his father about it, and was sorry enough when Alick left Oxley, not exactly under a cloud, but not in the highest favour. He had not succeeded in winning at Midsummer the scholarship which took the second boy of the year from Oxley to Oxford. Geoffrey had obtained the first. He just failed in getting the silver medal when Geoffrey took the gold one; he was obliged to confess to a great many little bills that his allowance would not cover, and was confronted with the head master's final letter, which without any very serious charge against him, accused him of falling short in every particular. That he was a universal favourite had not much mended the matter, as his influence had tended to a certain in-

efficiency and indifference to sustained efforts, that lowered the tone of that part of the school which came under his influence.

"That last is a serious charge, Alick," said Mr. Leighton. "What can you say to all this?"

Alick said nothing. His great dark eyes looked as miserable as those of a dog in disgrace. Lecturing Alick was always hard work.

"They never learnt any harm from me," he said after a pause. "I'm very sorry, father. I'll try and work harder, and—and not waste any money."

"I do not know how to have any confidence in you, Alick."

"That's all, father," said Alick. "I never did any worse than that. I wish I got on as well as Geoff does. He goes at things—like—like water out of a squirt. But I'll try. Mother was so vexed."

"Yes, Alick, and if we let you go to

college where the temptations are so much greater than at school, I am afraid your mother and I will be very anxious indeed about you."

"But, father," said Alick after a pause, "you know I can't take orders if I don't go to college."

"Is that your wish?" said Mr. Leighton surprised.

"Why, yes, I thought it was all settled. I told mother years ago that I should like it, and she said she was very glad I had such a purpose, and that she hoped I should keep to it."

"Well, Alick, I hope you may, if you make yourself fit for it. You will have to pull yourself up in a variety of ways first. A parson who can't keep himself out of debt is a very poor creature."

Alick pondered. He was never a boy of many words.

"I mean to try," he said presently.

"Well, Alick, of course I wish to see my sons at the university. I am sorry that Fred has not taken that turn. You shall have your chance. Do your best."

"I wish," said Alick, "that I had had those ridiculous mumps last summer instead of Geoff; then he would have gone up and got the Balliol."

"It was a disappointment," said Mr. Leighton; "but we don't know that he would have been successful. Now send him in to me."

"It is all right about Geoff," said Alick cheerfully, as he went in search of his brother whom he found alone in the dining-room, in which room the young people mostly sat in the morning.

"Geoff," he said, "father wants you. And he has been awfully jolly to me, and you and I will go up to Oxford together. And I say, you pull me up when you think I deserve it. And if I come into your

rooms and work I can't piffle away all my time—you won't let me."

Geoffrey stood up, colouring to his hair roots. He made no answer to Alick's observations, but went straight into his father's library. He stood up on the rug before him, and Mr. Leighton contemplated him with the sense that here was a boy whose career was surely marked out for him, and whose success in life was as certain as anything in the world could be. There were limits to the future of the slow Fred, and many doubts as to that of the dawdling, soft-eyed Alick, but Geoffrey's strong brows and firm-set lips showed a power all the more remarkable in his pink and white regularly formed face, that was at once so girlishly delicate and so hard.

"I have made up my mind to say," he began at once, "that I do not wish for a university career. I should like to go into business."

“Geoffrey?” exclaimed Mr. Leighton, in extreme surprise.

“I should prefer it,” said Geoffrey, jerking out his words in the harsh, rapid way natural to him when embarrassed or moved. “I should like to be independent early in life. I heard Mr. Marsden ask you last year if you would like to put a son into his business. I suppose the premium and keeping me till I get a salary wouldn’t cost *more* than Oxford, even now I have got a scholarship. Of course it does not come to much unless one could get a share in the business, but I would save up in time, to get a very little one. A gentleman of education would be very useful. I could soon get up modern languages. And I should lose none of my interest in intellectual pursuits. I should take care to show that I could be a scholar—and keep up with modern thought as well.”

“What possible motive can you have for

giving up a career for which nature has certainly fitted you?"

Geoffrey turned scarlet.

"I wish it. I can't give any other reason," he repeated.

"Your education has always been pursued to one particular end. Any other idea never occurred to me."

"You have been very good, I know, always," muttered Geoffrey with averted head, and such evident emotion as greatly to surprise his father.

"I have done what was right by you, Geoff. Of course I will consider what you say, but I do not promise to abide by it."

Geoffrey hurried away as if glad to accept any dismissal, and his father, much ruffled and disturbed, endeavoured to consider the matter. Geoffrey was always rather perverse, with views that could not be calculated on, but no one had expected such a sudden turn as this.

Time makes a great difference. In Alick and Geoffrey's childhood Mr. Leighton had been intensely sensitive to the peculiarity of their position; but as the years passed on, and nothing came to recall it to his mind, it died away, and it was long since he had thought of them except as his two sons, whose future he was bound to consider. No other idea had crossed his mind during his conversation with Alick or with Geoffrey, till it was recalled by the latter's words, "You have been very good to me always." Could it be that Geoffrey had any view of his own about the matter? The idea was most painful and unwelcome. Mr. Leighton was proud of his clever son, and had become so without any loss of affection for the more engaging Alick.

He could conceive no motive for Geoffrey's choice. His name had been put down at a desirable college, a year ago, in case he should fail in obtaining a scholar-

ship; he had been advised to leave the school exhibition and try in a wider field at higher game, and no one had doubted of the career before him.

Mrs. Leighton was as much puzzled as her husband. She talked to Geoffrey, who was evidently unhappy, and distressed at the annoyance he was causing, but neither gave in nor explained himself.

May cried, and said she was ashamed to own him for a brother. Fred said, slowly:

“Dear me, Geoff, what a pity!”

Alick said nothing, till one evening, finding himself alone with his mother, he coloured up, and said:

“Mother, I think I know what Geoff means.”

“Has he told you?”

“Oh dear no, but I think I can guess.”

“It would be a great relief if you could throw any light on it. And indeed I don’t think that father will give in to Geoffrey

unless he gives him a proper reason for the change."

"Last year," said Alick, "when Geoff competed for the exhibition, of course you know he had to get his baptismal register, and some one—Paulet—who took his in at the same time, told me some one made a remark on the two names in it, and there was a little talk among the masters. Geoff was ready to kill them, Paulet said. And I believe he has resolved never to have to show it up again. I'm sure that's the reason."

"Did he say anything about it to you?"

"Oh no, but I knew directly I saw it—that—that we shouldn't like it. But I didn't see that it was of any use to mind."

"I think Geoffrey, too, must see that it would be foolish to shipwreck all his prospects for so trifling an annoyance."

"You know we don't like it," said Alick,

“and I know that Geoff cares a great deal more than I do.”

Mrs. Leighton reflected. She, too, like her husband, had practically forgotten the difficulty, and after a pause of surprised reflection she said :

“I think it would be rather weak of Geoffrey to give way to this feeling. It is a kind of sensitiveness that ought to be conquered, when so much depends on it.”

“Yes,” said Alick. “I think so, certainly.”

“Besides,” said Mrs. Leighton, “Geoffrey doesn’t consider how much easier it would be for him to earn his living successfully in his own line than in any other.”

Geoffrey’s entrance at this juncture prevented Alick from replying, and caused him to depart and leave the field free for his mother, if she wished to renew the discussion with Geoffrey, who looked cast down and uncomfortable.

"My dear," said Mrs. Leighton, as she watched him pulling the newspaper about, "Alick has given me a little hint about you. He says that some questions were asked you at Oxley about your baptismal register—questions that annoyed you."

"It doesn't matter, mother," cried Geoffrey, his face scarlet in a moment. "I—I don't want to discuss it. I'll give in, if such a point is made of it. I—I'll do as you all wish."

"What we wish is, that you should not disappoint yourself as well as your father, for a thing about which I do think, my dear boy, you are very needlessly sensitive."

"Oh, mother!" exclaimed Geoffrey, impetuously. He started up, threw his arms round her neck, and kissed her vehemently—a most unusual outbreak, for he was the least caressing of all the children. "Oh, mother!" he cried, almost

sobbing, "I'll do it if you wish." And then, ashamed of his excitement, he dashed out of the room.

Mr. Leighton, however, did not at once accept this submission ; Geoffrey could not now, he said, matriculate till Easter, nor go into residence till after the long vacation. He must take a little time to consider of it, and, as he could not spend six months in idleness, had better take a tutorship somewhere for the present. Geoffrey said that he had been offered a tutorship to some little boys in delicate health, the younger brothers of a school-fellow, who lived some miles out of London. He could go every day by train, and would still have time to attend some scientific lectures and to keep up his other studies.

"And to learn book-keeping by double entry," said Alick, wickedly.

"Yes," replied Geoffrey, "I'll learn that too."

There was no doubt of Geoffrey's power of work, or of his ability to learn anything that he chose to give his mind to. His energies were always looking out for fresh food, and he was a very amusing inmate of the family circle, being full of talk and occupations. He took up music, as being at home afforded a suitable opportunity, acquired a great deal of the science, and sang the most difficult music with great spirit, but just sufficiently out of tune to make Alick, who whistled street airs all day long, but could not read a note, stop his ears whenever he heard him. When his prospects were no longer under discussion his high spirits returned, and he was the life of the house, so much possessed by his various pursuits that he *could* not brood over the dark thread that ran through his destiny, and, overwhelming his family with all he was doing, claiming interest and seeking sympathy in work and

play, yet not enduring a touch on the one sensitive place; full of schemes of life which he had all the force and energy necessary to carry out, yet which were liable to be dashed aside by gusts of feeling and passion, entirely outside the schemes, and uncontrollable by all his strength of character.



CHAPTER IX.

SWEET DULCIE FORDHAM.

“And the good stars met in her horoscope,
Made her of spirit, fire and dew.”

“So Mrs. Fordham has let her little bird fly. My dear Dulcie, we must take good care of you, and send you back safe to the nest again.”

So spoke Mrs. Leighton one sunny April afternoon, as she gave Dulcie Fordham a hearty welcome to the pleasant drawing-room at Sloane House.

Dulcie, now just turned seventeen, stood smiling and blushing, a slender, graceful girl, with much delicacy of outline, and with hair that grew in pretty curves and waves on her forehead. She had peculiar eyes—light-coloured and dark-lashed—not

what are called expressive or clever eyes, yet eyes to which her spirit lent a light, and which are only seen in imaginative people. Just now they were shining with pleasure, dashed with a little alarm, for this was her first visit to London, her first visit away from home, except to Willingham.

Dulcie, at this period of her existence, was valuable in her family for a certain pretty grace of conception and handiwork. She trimmed the hats, and set up the flowers, and expressed herself in romantic ways of arranging the furniture and her own clothes—she put life in a graceful point of view. She saw beauty and delight in all her surroundings, and rippled through her sunny days like a little brook in the meadows, and those who lived with her were the happier, they hardly knew how, for her existence. At this time she had no theories and ambitions, no high aims, and no conscious efforts to knock

against the heads of her family ; she was in most things unpractical and indifferent. "Miss Dulcie was very harmless," her nurse had once said of her as a child. But gentle as she was, she was neither dependent nor clinging. Her thoughts and fancies were her own, and she was sufficient for herself ; while her life was so quiet that the quick sensitiveness which made her days so vivid had no chance of showing itself as excitability. She had outgrown her governess some time since, and had continued to attend a few classes at the Manor ; but when, on the marriage of her daughter Alice, Mrs. Leighton had written to beg that Dulcie might be spared for a couple of months, to be a companion for May, and share in some of her masters, Florence Venning had felt that it would be a great opening out of life for her little favourite, and was glad when Mrs. Fordham consented to let her go.

She had parted also with Annie Macdonald, who left school at Easter and went to pay a long visit to her relations in the north. Annie was quite determined not to forget all that she had learnt at school: she still secretly regarded it as her stock-in-trade; but she knew that her life might take another turn, and perhaps thought a little more of her own value, because she knew very well what brought Alick Leighton so often to Bridgehurst, not only on the rare occasions when their holidays did not coincide, but when Lady Anne was alone, and he could find an excuse for making himself agreeable to her.

One difficulty with regard to Dulcie's visit had been that, though May was still eager for self-improvement, she was turned eighteen and was "out." Was not Dulcie too young to share her gaieties, and yet Mrs. Leighton could not leave her at home by herself? Another year—— But Dulcie

was so eager to go, and coaxed her mother so effectually, that permission was granted, Captain Fordham rather holding the view that a young lady ought to appear in society as soon as she was grown up enough to behave herself there with propriety.

“Oh,” said Dulcie. “Mamma, I know how to behave—

“ ‘ Hold up your head,
Turn out your toes,
Speak when you’re spoken to,
Mend your clothes.’

I believe that’s a perfect code of manners and morals. ‘Hold up your head’—have a proper self-respect. ‘Turn out your toes’—be as elegant and pretty-behaved as you can. ‘Speak when you’re spoken to’—don’t be forward and don’t be shy. ‘Mend your clothes’—don’t neglect your domestic duties.’”

Whether this sally convinced Mrs.

Fordham of Dulcie's capacity for grown-up life or not, she let her go, and Dulcie soon found herself much at her ease in Sloane House, ready for any amount of sight-seeing, and anxious to profit by her opportunities for improvement.

She had a singing-master who was willing to polish up her pretty fresh voice and to teach songs that should be available for society; but May Leighton scorned this unscientific and ill-grounded "finish," she insisted on attending art classes of the highest order, where she gained a great many ideas and, in her short experience, no means whatever of carrying them out.

"Miss Florence Venning *must* have had more advanced ideas," May said, "than to talk of *accomplishments*."

"Oh," said Dulcie, "she says, after all, half a loaf is better than no bread, and every one can't be artists and musicians."

"Ah," said May loftily, "she is

demoralised by having to satisfy the requirements of a country town."

May Leighton was a nice-looking girl of the dark-eyed, round-faced type, but with all Geoffrey's flow of conversation and disposition to "tall talk." She assured Dulcie that art demanded the devotion of a life, and that to talk of learning drawing as a "nice resource," or for a little amusement, was an 'utterly unworthy thing. "So untrue!" she declared; while Dulcie wavered between an inclination to burn all the water-colours done under the instruction of the Oxley drawing master, and to laugh a little, secretly, at notions that seemed so queer to her.

"Your drawings are very pretty," said Mrs. Leighton, interposing, and so they were, for Dulcie had a pretty little facility of touch and colouring quite available as a "nice resource," but wholly unworthy of the "devotion of a life."

Dulcie leant back reflectively and clasped her hands at the top of her head.

“But I wonder——”

“Dulcie wants to be *aut Cæsar aut nullus*,” said Alick, who had come in unobserved.”

“Ah, but I can’t,” she cried, with her eager sweetness, vehement, and yet checked by a thousand contradictory notions. “Is nothing worth doing but the best of all? Must one be so fearfully thorough?”

“Well,” said Alick, “it would be an awful relief to make up one’s mind when one isn’t a genius, there’s no good in mugging away on a fine day.”

“Oh, but that’s your *duty*—that’s quite a different thing,” said Dulcie.

“Duty!” said May. “Not a bit more his duty than ours. Such narrow notions! Duty is a very misleading word. The thing is to avoid shams; and half-hearted trumpery work like Dulcie’s drawings—

dear Dulcie, you don't mind, do you?— is a sham. Better to draw a straight line right than a landscape wrong."

"But landscapes aren't like arithmetic," cried Dulcie, with a flash of having caught an idea. "Can't they be a *little* pretty—a little good?"

"Oh, if you talk about things being *pretty*!" cried May, in high disdain.

"There's not the slightest use in any girl thinking about her appearance, unless she is as handsome as Helen of Troy," suggested Alick, in his soft, lazy undertone.

"Alick, that's unfair, somehow," cried his sister. "And it is quite a duty to make the best of one's appearance, and to study one's points."

"One's points!" said Dulcie. "But that would be thinking about oneself."

"Well, don't you think about yourself and how you look?"

"Sometimes I try not to," said Dulcie, blushing and confused. "Only one must be neat."

"Well," said the relentless May, "there's another sham. Doesn't everyone want to be pretty? Why do you pretend not to care?"

"Oh, because——"

"Because she is all the prettier for pretending," said the wicked Alick, evoking of course a chorus of denial from the young ladies, who at once joined forces against him.

"What a noise you are all making," said Geoffrey, coming in upon them.

"To make up for your absence," said May; and then they all turned round and appealed to the new comer; and Geoffrey sententiously gave out that a woman should cultivate her womanliness first, and other things only as they conduced to it.

Dulcie thought it very fine, and didn't

quite understand what he meant ; but in all this clash and clatter of conflicting tongues, her young spirit woke, and her mind took one of the great starts of life.

“It was deafening,” the mother would say, laughing.

“Oh, the ideas deafen my mind,” cried Dulcie. But she liked it. Books and high art, politics and philanthropy ; society, where they met interesting people and heard clever talk, were all in turn delightful to the eager girl, though sometimes she was shocked and frightened to hear the immutable home standards made objects of discussion.

Dulcie was caught by every new notion, and yet tenderly loyal to every old idea and practice.

The Leighton politics were moderately Liberal ; but Geoffery, who no doubt if born among Conservatives, would have been a Radical of the reddest dye, professed

himself a Tory, a reactionary Tory, and trailed his coat, like any Irishman, for his brothers to tread on.

This was all very well, and Dulcie was delighted that the cleverest of them all should fight for the old-fashioned principles in which she had been bred, though she was rather surprised at finding that the opinions of Conservatives, as expressed by Geoffrey, were so exceedingly strong. She didn't quite recognise her father's beliefs, in Geoffrey's championship of them. So she indulged in an innocent romance of loyalty, and thought all the sights of London surpassed by the sight of the Queen.

King Charles I. was regarded as too old-fashioned a subject of dispute; nobody cared one way or the other about Prince Charlie till Dulcie, half-mischievous, half-defiant, ran over to the piano in the dusk, and sang "Charlie is my darling," in her

fresh young voice, and all the boys pressed round to listen.

"Sing another, Dulcie ; I'm no end of a Jacobite," said Alick.

"I'll join in chorus to anything," said Fred ; and—

"*Do* sing again," in a vehement undertone from Geoffrey.

"Try the *Marseillaise*, Dulcie," chimed in Mr. Leighton's voice from the inner room. "It'll do just as well for the *Pied Piper*."

And the next day Alick brought home a white rosebud, and Fred a Stuart tartan paper-knife, "as a bribe for a song," as he declared.

"What a touching offering, so sweet and appropriate !" said May, feeling the sharp edge of the paper-knife. "Alick's is much more romantic."

"But mine will last the longest."

"Where's yours, Geoffrey?" said his sister.

"I don't want to bribe Dulcie to sing," said Geoffrey, rather crossly.

But Dulcie, blushing and confused, was too shy to sing a note, and flying over to the piano, vehemently played a waltz instead.

No more was said about Prince Charlie ; but the insinuating Alick coaxed song after song out of her on the afternoon before he went to Oxford, while the others were in the garden.

"They stir one's blood," said Alick, as he leaned comfortably over the end of the sofa and listened.

"I am sure one would have done it *all*," said foolish Dulcie, in a fervour of enthusiasm, with eyes shining and even a bit of a falter in her soft voice, and then with one of her sudden starts, she turned the bright eyes away, and ran out to join the others.

Unconsciousness is an exceedingly rare

quality, and perhaps can hardly exist long except in a nature of one-sided or defective sympathies; certainly not unless the "flower does really blush unseen" or is not worth notice. Self-possession is an excellent working imitation of it. Dulcie was too attractive and too easily wrought upon to be unconscious, and too timid and impulsive to be self-possessed. She knew quite well when she was the centre of attraction, and enjoyed the fun of it, when she did not forget herself and everything in the subject in hand. And then came little efforts at good manners and recollections of propriety, which seemed all owing to coquetry, when in truth nine-tenths was "behaviour."

But Dulcie did not trouble herself, for more than ten minutes at a time, about any one thing when so many things claimed her attention. She was delighted with Mrs. Leighton. The sympathy and interest of

an older person in all her little views and opinions was quite a novelty; for Mrs. Fordham, though a most affectionate mother, no more troubled herself about historical heroes, &c., than about dolls, regarding them as equally the province of early youth. But Mrs. Leighton had read history since she left school, and was not above having an opinion on it. She discussed books and poetry, and listened to Dulcie's vehement preferences, spoke affectionately of favourite heroes, and declared it rather pleasant to find young creatures with old-fashioned enthusiasms. May understood the Roman calendar and the Roman constitution, but had hardly time to dispute whether Cæsar or Pompey were the greater man, while Dulcie ran on for half an hour speculating and comparing with vivid interest.

All discussions were not, however, charming to her. The Leightons lived

in the full tide of events, and discussed Church matters freely, though always with gravity and propriety. Dulcie had been accustomed to hear criticisms of the parish church and clergy hushed up at once as disrespectful and irreverent. Actually there was not much difference—for the Leightons, like many people who see great varieties and take an intellectual interest in discussing them—were strict, quiet, and averse to novelties in their personal practice. But the young people had their preferences, and were allowed to indulge them, and Geoffrey, who represented the advanced point of Churchmanship in the family, was at the stage of incessant discussion and argument. His convictions were very aggressive, and he liked very much to talk about them, especially to so eager a listener as Dulcie, to whom, moreover, the beautiful and well-ordered services were a delightful revelation.

So all through one Sunday evening's tea they held a lively argument over all the neighbouring churches and their clergy, and Geoffrey relegated most of them to regions beneath contempt. Dulcie drooped her head over her plate, while brow and ears burnt painfully, and the long eye-lashes could hardly hold back the tears, till the general move to get ready for church revealed her face to May, who exclaimed :

“Crying, Dulcie? What special ideal have we been knocking down?”

“May,” said her mother, “don't keep the others waiting.”

The voice conveyed a reproof, and May ran off, letting Dulcie escape for the time.

But as they walked home from church by the river side in the lamp-light, Geoffrey got her to himself, and said much more gently than usual :

“Dulcie, I wish you would tell me—

was it anything I said that vexed you at tea-time?"

"I did not like to talk about it," murmured Dulcie, much ashamed.

"But, why not?"

"It didn't seem respectful. I didn't like it."

"But if things were never discussed they could never be improved?" said Geoffrey astonished.

"But I don't like to think that everything is just ready to be altered. And a church too! There ought to be some things that one *can't* talk about? You know, Geoffrey, it is as if one talked about papa and mamma."

Geoffrey's Toryism did not prevent him from differing decidedly from Dulcie's view, and he was not much in the habit of yielding to other people's opinions; but he looked at her bright eyes in the lamp-light and a strange rush of feelings came

over him. It was a very beautiful idea, he thought, however unlike the instincts of himself and his family. They made their way along the narrow, crowded pavement, under the gaslights. The moon was rising over the river, shining as brightly into the muddy waters, as if they had been clear as crystal, the old tumble-down buildings stood out dark and picturesque. Dulcie looked at the tower of old Chelsea church, and at the dirty old archway beside it, at the old shops, with no windows to them, and at the oddly-shaped houses near them, with an ineffable sense of romance, she felt as if she had stepped into the Middle Ages. Geoffrey was indifferent to the archway and its charms, but, without exactly feeling it, he was stepping into fairyland.

CHAPTER X.

LONDON SOCIETY.

“Hers was the subtlest spell by far
Of all that set young hearts romancing :
She was our queen, our rose, our star,
And then she danced—oh, heaven, her dancing !”

DULCIE'S time was by no means entirely devoted to improving her mind. She came in for a good deal of society, and the first great occasion on which she made her appearance was Miss Osgood's coming-out ball.

Geoffrey was always ready for any kind of society, and Fred was good-natured and always at his mother's call, so that though Alick had returned to Oxford, the party did not want for squires, and Dulcie, all in white, looped up with hawthorn, looked all that was young and fresh and bright—a little shy indeed, and inwardly anxious

about the proper arrangement of fan, flowers, and handkerchief, but prepared to feel herself in perfect bliss if only—should she have any partners?

“Such a vision of youth as brings back the Commemoration balls of thirty years ago,” said Dr. Osgood, who had come to see his great-niece’s introduction.

Geoffrey, Fred, and the young Osgoods speedily set the matter of partners beyond dispute by claiming dances for themselves, and by introducing their friends, and Dulcie was soon in a state of unalloyed bliss. A girl’s delight in her first ball is not *all* comprised either in love of attention or in love of spinning about to the sound of sweet music—it is a world of romance as well, vague perhaps and objectless, but full of all life’s possibilities. No moon-rise or sunset ever shone on sea or shore more brightly than the gaslights and wax candles on Dulcie’s face; she was lady,

fairy princess, heroine ; she *was* what she had read and dreamed of, and her intense enjoyment transfigured her into absolute beauty. Never to sit still, never to miss a dance was perfect happiness. Delighted with the quantity of her partners, and with the triumph of having more than she needed, she was not aware when their *quality*, according to ball-room standards, began to rise. She did not know whose demand for a dance stamped her as worth dancing with, and did not in the least perceive that, when Captain Feversham took her down to supper and danced all the extras with her, she might be said to have passed in honours and taken her degree with credit. She did not know this ; but she knew he was a beautiful dancer, very good-looking, and an officer, and she heard from Miss Osgood that he was an Indian hero, so he made the central figure of the evening, the beautiful, de-

lightful, never-to-be-forgotten evening. May was always popular, and Mrs. Leighton was surprised when her daughter Alice, now Mrs. Clifton, said to her :

“ So you have a beauty on your hands, mother ? That little Dulcie is going to be a star. But you’d better look out, mamma, for if she is not a little flirt now, she will be, for Captain Feversham will teach her, and she won’t be his first pupil.”

Mrs. Leighton thought the tone of the remark a little spiteful, and said with a smile :

“ In London one does not meet the same people over and over again as in the country.” Nevertheless they did meet Captain Feversham several times during the next three weeks.

Dulcie did not know how or when she became aware of her own success—how it gradually dawned on her that *she* was the chief attraction, more sought after than

May, whose social powers and experience she held in such respect.

She did, however, find it out in a vague, dazzling, half unacknowledged fashion, and she liked it very much indeed. Life was very charming; sunny hues danced over everything; she was so full of enjoyment that every pursuit acquired a new charm for her, and she herself was more consciously charming. She was still very passive; admiration had come to her too easily to tempt her out of her way to seek it; she had no need and no inducement to any sort of boldness or forwardness; she had all the fine instincts of her careful breeding, and her little withdrawals and conscious proprieties, the funny little rules of good behaviour which she never broke, were perhaps coquettish, but never bold. It was dreamland still—a sort of ideal of lovely maiden, devoted suitors, brilliant triumphs, light and colour, enacted by the fanciful, imagi-

native child of seventeen. Some girls so dream, some so enjoy. Dulcie had the rare fortune to be capable of the dream, and fit for the reality.

“It won’t last for ever,” said Mr. Leighton to his somewhat astonished wife. “This is the zenith—a sort of glory of attractiveness—which some girls in their teens pass through. She will never be so lovely again. She is not really a great beauty, and it is not in her to make herself a belle.”

“Well,” said Mrs. Leighton, “I thought Dulcie would have taken more to the intellectual line.”

“It doesn’t happen very often,” said Mr. Leighton, “but when a genius is also attractive, charming, it is another thing. It beats the commonplace out of the field. There was so much affectation of the sort of thing formerly, that it has become discredited; but, who can doubt that Lord

Byron was charming, because he was a poet ; or that Raphael was much more fascinating than ordinary Italian gentlemen? And it occurs now and then with women."

"But you don't call little Dulcie a genius?"

"No, but I say she is made of the same stuff. She is a child of the air—her soul has wings. And pray, Marian," with a sudden turn to commonplace, "look well after her. I shall be very glad when she gets safe back to her mother."

"I am afraid it will turn her head."

"Oh, never mind her head ; she'll be as vain as a peacock, for a bit, no doubt. Mind her heart ; you don't know what a creature like that is made of, or what you'll come to under the glamour and the mist."

As Mr. Leighton had never uttered a remark on the social career of his own very popular and pleasant daughters, his wife

was a good deal impressed by this oracular utterance. She chaperoned Dulcie with scrupulous care ; and, indeed, the girl gave her no trouble ; never broke her rules or eluded her observation ; and Mrs. Leighton hoped that there was safety in numbers. Dulcie exceedingly liked the idea that she was admired by all the young men that they met ; but, at present, she was just as willing to receive their attentions when sitting by Mrs. Leighton's side, as to give them fuller opportunities of offering them. Yet Dulcie was exposed to danger real enough, though often little regarded. She had caught the temporary fancy of a man no longer young, very attractive, and very well used to attracting girls. Captain Feversham was not in the least likely to wish to marry Dulcie, or even to carry a flirtation with her to what he would consider a serious extent. But it was quite probable that he might make an indelible

impression on her youthful fancy ; spoil her taste for less skilful flatterers for an appreciable length of time, and—quite possible—that he might teach her lessons, and give her experiences which would either oppress her innocent young conscience, or burn off its keen edge. He began to form a subject of conversation between May and Dulcie. They knew what he was going to do on particular days, they found out that he had a sister called Beatrice, and that that sister sang. His regiment was at Malta, and he was at home on leave ; but they knew the history of that regiment, the colour of its facings, the nature of its exploits—they knew its special name, and all the places at which it had recently been stationed. Dulcie repeated the conversations she had held with Captain Feversham ; she had by no means reached the stage of *not* repeating them ; she discovered that he thought blue a pretty colour, and that jessamine was his

favourite flower. May, who was so superior, did not say to Dulcie that she thought that she had made a conquest, but she said it to herself, and speculated whether to give a hint of it to her mother, whom she supposed unconscious. The boys all ran after Dulcie, but this was quite a different thing.

In the meantime Captain Feversham, finding Dulcie quite ignorant of the rules of the game, and very slow to take advantage of her opportunities, was hardly aware of the impression he was making. The little fingers never seemed to know when a return pressure was expected of them ; the quick, lively tongue never said exactly the thing he tried to draw out ; the bright eyes looked the other way. They would have got on much faster, and on the whole he would have liked Dulcie better, if she had afforded him more chances. And yet in her own way the creature evidently enjoyed herself. There were glints and smiles, and

there began to be blushes, and Captain Feversham began to be on very friendly and intimate terms with May, and talked about Dulcie to her, a proof in the eyes of that sage young person that he was "quite in earnest."

At this stage of the proceedings a long-talked-of expedition to the Crystal Palace came about. It was a lion quite necessary to be shown to the country girl, and was fresher and newer then than now. On a fine day in May, with spring flowers all in bloom, and spring costumes in their first freshness, Dulcie thought it the most delightful place she had ever seen.

Mr. Leighton had declined to share in its delights; Fred and Geoffrey were to join them later in the day with Mr. Clifton, who, it may be mentioned, was a member of the firm to which Fred was articled.

The morning was prosperous. They inspected the antediluvian animals, and con-

gratulated themselves on their entire extinction. Dulcie picked out her favourite sovereigns from the "Screen of Kings." They went the round of all the courts, and May and Dulcie picked up materials for the scenery of a Moorish tale, then floating through the latter's fertile brain, in the Alhambra.

"Not that historical accuracy in such compositions was ever quite attainable," May thought, "and therefore historical tales were scarcely suitable to the present enlightened age."

But still Abdallah's situation was interesting, when, having fallen in love with his Christian captive, she bade him choose between the Crescent and herself.

"You must make him stick to the Crescent," said May.

"Yes; but he set her free, and afterwards, when he thought she was lost to him, he was *really* converted by an im-

prisoned hermit, and then——” Here Dulcie’s eager tongue suddenly stopped.

“There is Captain Feversham speaking to your mother,” she said.

“Did you know he was coming, Dulcie?” said May.

“No,” said Dulcie surprised ; then, catching the reverberation of some new accent in May’s tone, “No!” she repeated vehemently, and there was enough blush and confusion in the manner of her greeting to make the addition to their party more unwelcome than he otherwise would have been, as he said something about running down to hear the organ, and being surprised at meeting friends.

Dulcie’s grey eyes opened wider than usual. She perfectly recollected confiding her delight in the approaching expedition to Captain Feversham at the Horticultural Gardens only the day before yesterday.

Tea at four o’clock on the balcony over-

looking the gardens had been settled upon as a meeting place in case of accidents ; but the party did not mean to lose sight of each other, and consequently, when no one knew how or when Captain Feversham and Dulcie disappeared, Mrs. Leighton was annoyed, and said so to Mrs. Clifton.

“Why, of course,” said Alice, “he came here on purpose to lose himself. Well, I suppose she will enjoy her afternoon.”

“This is the first time I have had to complain of Dulcie,” said Mrs. Leighton. “I am sure it is not my fault, Alice. It has been the most slight acquaintance.”

“You see,” said Alice, “he can’t mean anything. He has nothing, except debts ; and besides, he is always paying attention to young girls in a mild way. Nothing will come of it for Dulcie, but—experience.”

Mrs. Leighton did not wish this kind of experience to be gained by a girl of seven-

teen while in her charge, and she was not aware that May was listening to the conversation.

"Well," said May bluntly, "I think people ought to be told when any one is so bad as that."

"So bad as what?" said Alice. "Didn't you know that Captain Feversham was a flirt. All the same he never flirts with girls who aren't worth flirting with, so Dulcie may feel flattered. Not that *I* would let him do it."

"I'm sure Dulcie won't be made an amusement of for anybody," said May hotly. "Why, there they are, and the boys with them."

Dulcie looked very much discomposed. She had not intended to lose herself, but had perhaps been too well amused by her companion to think of keeping them in track. At the same time she was very eager about the Ninevite and Assyrian courts, and for the first time had bored

the captain by what he thought pedantic questions. She was neither vain enough, nor enough taken up with him, to discover this and drop the subject. And he made a false step by laughing at the figures, and not being in the least aware why they interested her. She felt disappointed and a little bored in her turn, and though a common subject was presently found in the flowers by the fountain, both felt that they had managed badly and missed an opportunity, and when Fred and Geoffrey, with Mr. Clifton, were seen advancing on them, neither was very sorry. Geoffrey looked very black, and as Dulcie rather vehemently informed Fred that they were looking for the others, apparently under a blue lily in the central pond—the latter said, in his slow, good-natured way :

“Well, Dulcie, suppose we all go together, and try and find them.”

She felt as if there were a sort of rebuke

in his tones, and, to use an old nursery expression, was "so hurt in her mind," that she could have cried. She had committed, it seemed, a breach of etiquette, and it certainly hadn't been worth while, for she hadn't enjoyed it much herself, and was keenly conscious that her companion had not enjoyed it either. Flirting—they had never been farther from it in the whole course of their intercourse, whatever people might say. She was disappointed, it is to be feared, at the fact, and still more disappointed at the effect on her mind of a *tête-à-tête* with her hero, and much annoyed at being asked where she had been when the party at length met on the balcony.

"Miss Fordham was so delighted with the Assyrian bulls that I could not induce her to leave them," said Captain Feversham.

"I am very sorry if I bored you about them. I did not know that you disliked antiquities," she said, with what she in-

tended for freezing dignity, but which sounded uncommonly like annoyance.

"I think on a hot afternoon—I prefer tea," said Captain Feversham cheerfully.

"The Assyrian antiquities form a most interesting study," observed Geoffrey. "We ought to go and see the originals at the British Museum.

But Dulcie wouldn't talk about antiquities or about anything else. She sat by May and held her tongue. She listened when afterwards May, rather solemnly, informed her that Captain Feversham was not, she was afraid, to be trusted. People said he was a flirt."

"Of course he is," interrupted Dulcie sharply. "I know that, and there's an end of it."

When a fine steel blade is put to cut wood it gets awkward dints in it.

Dulcie had failed in her commonplace flirtation, and was disappointed in her

commonplace admirer. She felt disenchanted with herself and with him, ashamed, and a degree less joyous. Next time they met he was not quite so attentive. She did not know how easily she might have won him back, and before she had time to find out, her thoughts were turned in another direction.

The sense that the hero in real life was not such as a hero should be, and that it was possible to be bored even while receiving attention was crossed and confused in Dulcie's mind by a feeling of vexation at her own incapacity to manage the situation. In truth, the flirtation had failed because Captain Feversham had not been equal to hunting down such a rare bird as he had found; but Dulcie was not quite grateful for her deliverance. The beautiful damsel never ought to bore the most uncouth of knights. But the bird had escaped from the trap with only a ruffled feather.

CHAPTER XI.

“ONLY GEOFF.”

“Waking men to life from dreaming ;
Reaching truth through outward seeming ;
That is love.”

THE immediate result of Dulcie's little experience was to turn her attention back to the home circle, and to the occupations which she shared with May, while the approaching end of their visit caused much sight-seeing to be done in a hurry, for the Leightons did not despise the sights proper only to country cousins.

Dulcie had no cause to complain of any want of sympathy in her interests when she and Geoffrey walked all round the Tower together, and discussed every historical character connected with its past, beginning again on Lady Jane Gray and Lord Straf-

ford as if their merits and demerits had never been discussed before.

How delightful it was to eat dry buns and drink warmish lemonade by way of refreshment after the hot summer day, before they pushed through the crowded street and took a boat at Tower Stairs—a thing which Dulcie could never help feeling connected her with kings, traitors and other interesting people—and then sat on the deck of the crowded steamer, watching the curious effects of the smoky sunset, the dazzle of silver lights on the muddy water, passing the great old buildings one by one till the moon rose clear above the haze, and they walked home, weary and tired, to supper.

The next morning, the early breakfast was over, and Mr. Leighton was strolling up and down his garden paths before setting off for his chambers, when suddenly Geoffrey appeared before him.

"Father," he began, abruptly, "I—I think, under the circumstances, I ought to speak first to you. I—I want to marry Dulcie Fordham. Will you tell Captain Fordham about me, and ask his consent?"

Geoffrey was scarlet, and the extreme abruptness of his declaration gave it almost an appearance of childishness, especially when coming from so youthful a speaker.

Mr. Leighton looked at him, uttered an exclamation of astonishment, and then said, with half a smile :

"Since when have you come to this determination?"

"Ever since I was at school," said Geoffrey. "She—she fulfils my highest ideal."

"Really, Geoffrey," said Mr. Leighton, after a pause, "I think your application to me shows some want of common sense. I am not at all surprised at your feelings for so sweet a girl as Dulcie, nor even at your entertaining a fixed determination to win

her by and by, if you can ; but you ought to know that any formal conversation between myself and Captain Fordham would, at your age, be premature—almost ridiculous."

Geoffrey looked intensely hurt and misunderstood.

"I was determined that no one should say that I took advantage or acted in other than the most formal manner," he said, looking away, and speaking in his harshest voice.

Mr. Leighton laid his hand on his shoulder, and said kindly :

"My dear boy, you mean well, I don't doubt ; but it would be impossible to recognise any formal intentions on the part of a boy like you—your profession unsettled and your prospects so vague."

"I'll go to Oxford," said Geoffrey.

"Yes. I believe that you have a successful career in your power ; but it must e

rather further advanced before you could make any such proposals to headquarters. Of course, you know, you boys must depend on your own exertions."

"Oh," said Geoffrey, almost with tears in his eyes, "I never thought for one moment—I wouldn't for the world—but—I suppose I've made a fool of myself! But I didn't think mine—was an ordinary case."

"I respect your confidence," said Mr. Leighton, kindly, "and I won't consider it as official. Dulcie is a lovely creature, and I should regard it—as I have no doubt Captain Fordham would—as a very suitable connection in every way. She has no fortune, but that cannot be always expected."

Geoffrey looked up, half grateful, half searching out how much was implied in the words, and Mr. Leighton went on :

"She is so very young that I should advise you not to betray yourself. And,

of course, you were quite right in thinking that it would be unpardonable while she is here——"

"Oh, yes!" said Geoffrey; "but there's sure to be some other fellow——"

"Well, my boy, you must enter the lists like every other fellow, and fight your own battle. Now I must go," as a clock struck. "Think it over, and you will see that I am right."

Geoffrey felt that his effort had hardly been appreciated. In his determination to avoid any repetition of the unhappy history of that "near relation," every detail of which he had contrived to learn, Geoffrey had thought his confidence heroic. Now he began to feel that it had been unnecessary and rather foolish—a reflection that made his ears burn. As he crossed the lawn slowly and sadly, he suddenly encountered Dulcie herself standing under an arch of little crimson roses talking to May,

and looking fair enough, her young lover thought, to attract every "other fellow" in Oxley, from the eldest unmarried tutor to the youngest sixth-form boy. Besides, girls in the country were always meeting curates and dancing with officers. And, worst of all, there were many-acred and empty-headed young squires, whom she might meet at the Osgoods'. Oh, how could he endure it!

"Well, really, I *do* think he is very delightful," Dulcie was saying eagerly, as Geoffrey came upon them.

May laughed and ran off, and Dulcie looked confused, as she said:

"Only two days more! I am so very sorry."

"Are you?" said Geoff, vaguely, and pulling at the roses.

"Oh, yes! I *have* enjoyed myself! And May and I seem to find more things to talk about every day."

"You'll write to May?"

"Of course. Oh, yes, I shall tell her everything. But what is the matter, Geoffrey? Has any one been doing wrong?" she added laughing.

"No—unless it's myself. There isn't much use in your writing to May—she'll never show me your letters. I suppose girls have secrets——"

"Well, Geoff," began Dulcie, then paused. Perhaps her mother would not approve of an impulsive promise to write to him, and she blushed deeply, and to cover it up said, as she smelt the roses, "Oh, of course, I tell secrets to May."

"It isn't fair to make a secret of what may wreck a man's life!" cried Geoffrey, passionately.

She turned, and stared at him for a moment, uncomprehending, and he exclaimed:

"There, I've done it now! I never

meant to! But you may as well know it. My whole hope in life is to win you. I don't want to bind you now; but if you are honest you will tell me if—if my chance is over. Is *that* your secret?"

"My secret?"

"You were talking of some one to May. You spoke with admiration——"

"Oh," stammered Dulcie, almost with tears of shame, "it—it wasn't. *How could* you think? It was only Abdallah—the Moor—in our story. Oh!" and seized with a sense of the ludicrousness of the idea, she began to laugh, and Geoffrey, relieved, conscious of having again been very foolish, laughed aloud too.

He was the first to regain his gravity, or at any rate his self-control, and said, firmly enough: "Well, Dulcie, I am no hero, but you know it all now. I love you, and when I have the right, I shall come again and tell you so."

Dulcie could not speak, and really did not know what to say.

The words roused her out of a sweet confusion of girlish dreams of a possible hero, as delightful as Abdallah—that chivalrous compound of saint and cavalier who was one day to turn up in a tweed suit or a dress coat—just like other young men apparently, probably talking a little slang and very fond of playing cricket, who should be capable of every virtue ever bound up between the boards of all the one-volume tales and novelettes ever permitted to Dulcie, with a dash of the Waverley novels to give fire and spirit. The type had varied according as Dulcie had been deeply impressed by the "Heir of Redcliffe," or excited by the dash of "Lewis Arundel," very full of Abdallah or his predecessors, or touched by the possibility of finding in some real just-seen or heard-of individual, a fulfilment of the

ideal. But a hero there had been, and half the charm of her London life had been the finding out that *when he did come* she would be likely to win him.

And now here was *Geoffrey*! She liked Geoffrey very much, and had always known that he liked her—but “not in *that way*.”

Surely Geoffrey was not her hero? She couldn't care for *him*!

And yet the real words of real love smote with a strange new strength upon her, went down to the childish heart that lay there untouched beneath all her effervescence of fancy. She forgot any theories as to how a young lady ought to behave on receiving an offer, and as Geoffrey, growing more vehement with her silence, seized her hand, and repeated: “I love you—I love you. Can't you care at all for me?” she looked at him, and answered with the strictest truth:

"I don't know, Geoffrey."

"Don't know? If you care nothing for me, tell me so, and let me make up my mind to it."

Dulcie's throat ached with the effort to bring out her words.

"I can't say that. But I can't say the other. I haven't grown up enough. I—I wish——"

"What do you wish, darling? I'll do anything you wish."

"I wish you would wait, and ask me by and by; but I couldn't promise now, so—so—I think I ought to say I cannot."

She burst into tears at last, and ran away from him, just as Mrs. Leighton advanced on the scene.

"Why, Dulcie, what's the matter?" she said, and then perceived that she ought not to have asked the question, and let the girl fly off to her own room, while she faced her son, on whom the recollection of his

conversation with his father came back uncomfortably.

"Really, Geoffrey," she said, when she understood what had passed, "I do not think you ought to have spoken to her now."

"I couldn't help it," said Geoffrey. "Of course I know nothing can come of it yet—even if she cares a fig about me."

Of course the whole household knew what had passed. May was very much inclined to laugh at the idea of Geoffrey in such a capacity. Mrs. Leighton soothed Dulcie and told her that she was quite right, that no one could expect her to make Geoffrey any answer at all then; she should not be teased any more. Geoffrey must wait and have patience till his prospects were more confirmed. She felt that Mrs. Fordham might think "only Geoff" a flat result of all her daughter's triumphs.

Mr. Leighton heard the story with great surprise and disapproval.

"I am disappointed to find, Geoffrey," he said, "that you have so little power of keeping a resolution"—a remark which put poor Geoffrey into an agony of indignant shame.

"Dulcie?" said Fred, on coming home in the evening and hearing in confidence what every one knew before. "Dear me, I'd see what you think about it in a couple of years, Geoff."

Geoffrey absented himself during most of the remaining two days, and did not "tease" Dulcie any more. She gathered that he was blamed on her account, and he began to stand on quite a different level. She began to think that she knew what she should say to him in that far distant future when she saw him again.

May regarded the incident as rather a tiresome absorption of her friend's chief interests, and an interruption in the career of Abdallah. She could have sympathised

in a confidence about a stranger, but blushes and confusion about "*Geoff*," whose behaviour was often very reprehensible and whose hair was always so very sandy, seemed to lower Dulcie in her estimation. Besides, plans for future visits were difficult under the circumstances, and altogether May was disgusted.

"It will retard Dulcie's development," she said to her mother, almost with tears in her eyes, when all the farewells were spoken, and Dulcie's last smiles and blushes had been seen out of the window of a South Western Railway carriage.

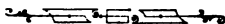
"Perhaps," said her mother, with half a smile, "it may expedite Geoffrey's."

"Geoffrey!" said May, with some scorn.

"My dear," said Mrs. Leighton, "Geoffrey, like some one not very far off, is inclined to think very well of himself. A sincere admiration for someone else is not a bad thing for him."

"Oh, yes," said May. "I—I know I'm rather conceited. I've read that young people often are when there's anything in them."

Mrs. Leighton laughed, for this speech was like an echo of one of Geoffrey's. But she had not judged the children quite quite truly, for across Geoffrey's self assertion there flashed innumerable self-doubts and self-contempts which were quite unknown to May's cheerful self-satisfaction.



CHAPTER XII.

PROSPECTS IN LIFE.

“It was the little rift within the lute.”

MORE than three years had passed by and brought Geoffrey Leighton nearly to the end of his college career, which had been entirely creditable and successful. By the end of his last long vacation he could not but feel that he was winning for himself a place in the world that would not be much affected by his peculiar circumstances, and neither his relations nor Dulcie's were any longer unwilling to acknowledge in name what had long existed in fact. The long-standing attachment was to be proclaimed as an engagement, and one September day of peaceful warmth and mellow sunshine Geoffrey found himself alone with her on the broad path by the fruit-laden wall in

the Fairfield garden, free to speak out his heart to her, and win her to tell him the secrets of hers in return.

People said she had hardly the beauty her early girlhood had promised, but she was a sweet creature still, noticeable and graceful, with half-absent mystical eyes, in curious contrast to the simple girlish face. Dulcie was always successful in society, and very popular among her friends—and she had a great many friends considering her opportunities; her eager nature caught at points of sympathy and interest. She had a great many occupations, and tried her prentice hand with varying success at all sorts of accomplishments and acquirements. She had views and notions on all sorts of subjects, and had grown much fonder of discussions since the days when the Leightons had made her cry by their free-spoken criticisms.

She had met Geoffrey occasionally when permitted by the authorities, and she knew well enough that his intentions towards her were unchanged. She could hardly have been said to have been at first very actively in love with him, but none the less had the lines of her fate been drawn on that morning under the roses. She meant to marry him, and thus the vague and misty avenues of the future were closed. The dreamy and imaginative girl had a real future to look forward to. She no longer dreamed of a "not impossible he," nor wondered, hardly knowing that she wondered, whether a new acquaintance might prove to be the prince; while the wilder and more impalpable fancies of fame, fortune, or self-devotion which come to the maidens of this stirring age, either never took shape, or were transferred from herself to the heroines of the tales which she still scribbled, and for whose benefit

she still invented Prince Charmings. For whatever she did, learned, or became, she knew quite well that it would all "end in Geoff." So, though her mind was not altogether taken up with his image, and though her relations sometimes doubted whether he really possessed her heart, her knowledge of his feelings had made an immense difference in the development of her character.

Now Geoffrey stood before her, having had three years in which to test his feelings, and to develop his prospects, and both knew that the order for silence was tacitly withdrawn.

Geoffrey, all flushed and eager, his keen eyes for once soft and tender, and the power and capability of his expression giving dignity to his slight figure and fair, delicate outlines, looked no bad substitute for Dulcie's dreams. They looked at each other. Geoffrey drew nearer, she smiled,

and they kissed each other. She had given herself at last without a word, or a doubt, and no thought of past or future complications came into his mind.

“ My sweet Dulcie, you know *now*,” he whispered.

“ Yes—I know now—I think I have known always.”

There was a silence, then suddenly she started from him, and said, half laughing and half tearful :

“ But I don’t know if it will answer, Geoffrey. For if you are dismal I shall be miserable too, and cry. If you are angry I shall fly out. I shall forget things, and you won’t remember them, and if you leave your pocket-handkerchiefs about the country I—I’m sure I shall never pick them up. And if you get what Fred calls maggots in your head, I shall have much bigger ones ! We—we shall go off in a balloon, and no ballast between us !”

“ Then we'll mount to the very stars ! ”
cried Geoffrey.

“ And come down with a run ! Oh, Geoffrey, I mean that I know I'm a goose—and—and your—— ”

“ I'm another ! ”

“ No—no—but your—— ”

“ Well—what—my what ? ”

“ Your—wife—ought to look after things for you, and—and keep everything right, so that you may be free to succeed in life and be as great as possible.”

“ No—no ! My firefly—my Ariel, she shall point my way ! ”

“ She is only a will-o'-the-wisp ! ” said Dulcie, “ or a horrid little company wax-candle.”

“ She is my sweet-heart ! But, Dulcie, you have been calling yourself names, and giving me a bad character. Come and walk down the path with me, and I will show you how I have been planning out my life, and I

think you will see that I have had due regard to the ballast."

They turned and walked away together, and Geoffrey continued in a different tone :

" You know, Dulcie, my whole history. Even to you I will not talk of the facts, nor of my own view of them. But the result has been to substitute for any other ambition a firm determination to make myself independent as early in life as possible, and to avoid all needless expenses. *I* could not have been extravagant. I should despise myself if I caused pain or annoyance to those to whom I owe so much. Of course you know there was an idea that I should be called to the bar—my father wished it. I couldn't explain to him my real motives—that is, one of my motives ; but he knew that I wanted to be married, and that the bar was no road to that."

" He wanted you to be like himself," said Dulcie.

“ Yes—but he had a private fortune, and so had mother, and he did not marry young. There are six of us—they *mean* us to share alike, and the girls will have their mother’s money. At present, of course, we have nothing. And besides, times are changed, success is much slower and more doubtful at the bar than it used to be, and numbers are greater. So, Dulcie, that wouldn’t do for us!”

Dulcie blushed, and murmured something about “ willingly waiting and growing wiser,” but Geoffrey continued :

“ No, no ! I cannot speak yet with certainty. All must depend on the degree I take. If it is a good one I have interest that I think would make me sure of a Government inspectorship. They are not always, or I believe ever, given to clergymen now. That is a good and increasing income—one might be in the way of other appointments.”

Dulcie did not think the proposal very

attractive; the woolsack, or at any rate the bench, had shone before her eyes as the natural ending to Geoffrey's career, and she did not realise the years that lay between.

"I shouldn't like you to sacrifice the future—for—for being in a hurry about me," she said, shyly.

"It's not that," said Geoffrey. "I would win honours for you, Dulcie; but I *must* be independent. There must be no risk of being an expense or burden. You know," he added, vehemently, "that I ask you to share a lot with a crook in it. If you did not know it already, I don't think I could have brought myself to tell you of it. I would rather have lost you!"

It was an odd speech from an ardent lover, and Geoffrey frowned and set his teeth as he made it.

"Why should you mind so much, Geoff?" said Dulcie softly. "They all love you and Alick alike, and you cannot know——"

Geoffrey suddenly flashed his eyes on her with a look that startled her with its force.

"No, I don't *know*!" he said, sharply, and then was silent, and his keen bright eyes positively filled with tears. "Oh, Dulcie," he said, "I can't tell even you how I love them. When I think of mother—I suppose other fellows never do think about it at all!"

Dulcie, infinitely touched, could only squeeze his hand hard, and Geoffrey turned his face to her again.

"So, my darling, to have you for my very own, to say my *own* wife, will be a double joy for me. *That* tie is sure and can never be slackened. Though I dare say I shall be as faulty as a husband as I have been as a son," added Geoff, always self-conscious.

"If you are, I'll be sure and mention it!" said Dulcie, mischievously. "I never did believe in silent endurance like Enid and patient Grizzel. How one would hate a per-

son if one had silently endured them for years! Now a good quarrel, and then—kiss and be friends ——”

“Haven’t we been quarrelling?” said Geoffrey.

“Surely, not yet,” said another voice, as at a turn of the path they almost ran up against Alick, strolling slowly between the gooseberry bushes. “Well, is it all settled?”

“Only that we’re to quarrel whenever we like,” said Dulcie, yielding a willing hand to Alick’s brotherly greeting.

“That’s good,” he said, heartily, though a little wistfully too. “Wish you joy, Geoff, with all my heart.”

“Thanks,” said Geoffrey. “It’s—it’s a very joyful occasion.”

Dulcie and Alick both laughed, and the former, saying something about “mamma,” ran off and left the brothers together.

Alick was more than ever a fine powerful fellow, taller than Fred or than his father,

and big enough to look down some inches on Geoffrey. He had blunt features and a sallow complexion, but beautiful eyes, soft and kindly, which narrowed up into the pleasantest smile, though their usual expression was rather wistful and sad. Alick was conscious of a certain want of success. He had taken his degree, but it was nothing to boast of; he had left behind him at Oxford the memory of nothing very wrong, and nothing disgraceful, but of many things which he had better have left undone, and he had brought away debts enough, not to ruin him, but to hold him back and to clog his future career. And all this had come to pass, though he knew so well that he might have done better. He had "left undone those things which he ought to have done, and done those things which he ought not to have done," and he said so over and over again to himself, and to his parents too. For the thought that would

have stung Geoffrey to frenzy found no place in Alick's mind. He grieved at having grieved his parents, but never could realise that he had less than the usual claim on their parental love and forgiveness. The thought would not stay with him. And still he hoped to make a good clergyman in the end, and was reading for orders and learning parish work with Mr. Blandford, the vicar of Fordham, and this having always been his bent, he liked the work better, and was more successful in it than he had ever been before. He was popular, and was praised by his vicar. Only, Alick himself, grown self-distrustful by long experience, never could deliver himself from the fear that he should some day do something very foolish, and bring discredit on all he held most sacred.

If he could only have the one thing he wished for in life! Annie Macdonald's golden hair had been a lodestar to him ever

since the day that he had seen her on the bridge. Ever since, he had sought for holiday meetings and planned excuses for days at Bridgehurst ; but Annie had never been quite propitious, and of late poor Alick had been forced to own to himself that he had no right to come forward, and but little chance if he did. Annie, in her shabby dresses and her cheap straw hats, held her head so very high that a possible curacy in the future did not seem worth even laying at her feet.

She was now staying with the Fordhams, a tall, slim girl, with a certain air of distinction, and brilliantly fair hair, a fair freckled skin, and sharp, small features. She was clever, and, as she had once expressed it, "knew quite enough for society," and now, more consciously than most girls, was trying her luck. Her various good connections not being as spiteful as well-to-do relations are usually represented in

books, had taken much notice of her, and she had visited in various grand houses, where she had met with quite her share of attention. She had little piquant ways, sometimes gracious and sometimes disdainful; but she was cautious too, and took care—with a prudence that was a little sad and premature at twenty-one—not to give offence to her chaperons, or to get quoted as a “detrimental” young lady.

She was not very good at home; life at Bridgehurst with Lady Anne was very dull, and she was only half-liked as a rule by girls of her own age—the Osgoods having a tendency to speak of her as “poor Annie Macdonald, whom we must invite”—May Leighton regarding her as dreadfully frivolous, while Dulcie stared with puzzled eyes at her little bits of worldly wisdom, and gave her credit for never meaning them.

The skirts of her blue muslin caught Alick’s eyes as he stood by Geoffrey, and

caused him to heave a sigh as he held out his hand and said ;

“I suppose it’s time for formal congratulations. Is it all settled up now?”

“I believe so,” said Geoffrey, “thank you. It was settled long ago as far as I was concerned.”

“Ah, the half isn’t the whole,” sighed Alick ; but though Fred had had to listen to many a prose—not to say poem—on Annie’s unattainable charms, Alick had never confided his hopes and fears to Geoffrey, nor had the latter on his side ever spoken of Dulcie, though Fred again had frequently been assured of how happy Geoffrey would be able to make her.

Alick was not conscious of feeling less warmly towards Geoffrey than towards the others ; but Geoffrey was quite aware that he was never at ease with Alick—never enough at ease to express the disapproval he often felt. What was the use, Geoffrey

thought, of sighing after a girl and never taking any steps to win her? Alick should keep his money in his pocket, and lay himself out for pupils or something remunerative. How could a curacy by itself enable him to marry? Or if the case was hopeless, what *was* the good of coming over to Fairfield just because Annie was staying there? Sympathy with himself and Dulcie had not occurred to Geoffrey as a likely motive, and yet Alick had really been desirous to see his brother happy, though the contrast became more painful to himself.

Dulcie, as she ran into the house, was caught by Annie and laughingly kissed.

"So you have settled it all?"

"I think it has been settled some time," she said, bashfully.

"Ah, what a lucky girl you are to have your life all settled for you. No puzzles for you!" said Annie, with more feeling than she often showed.

Dulcie smiled radiantly, though a thoughtful look came into her eyes.

"I am very happy," she said softly.

"I dare say you are. But I—I shall have to take pattern by Aunt Anne. I shall be an old maid, and as I shall be very poor I shall have a very dismal life."

"You have just as good a chance of being married one day, if you choose, as I have. Annie, and that you very well know," said Dulcie, shyly.

"Ah, if I choose——"

"One chance, at any rate; I can't say about others."

"That's not a chance, Dulcie—at least it is an impossible one. How could—Alick—and I ever afford to marry each other, even if I liked him well enough? He will be a curate: I have nothing. Look here, Dulcie, I'm at a turn of the road. If I chose, I could earn my living now, and take to life from that side of the question.

I should have more money, and an occupation, and the holidays to amuse myself in, and perhaps as many interests as Miss Florence. What do you think?"

"Lady Anne wouldn't let you," said Dulcie, startled.

"Oh, yes, she would, Dulcie. I can't go on doing nothing and dawdling about at Bridgehurst, living with Aunt Anne. *That's* quite out of the question. Grow old like that! Aunt Anne doesn't wish it at all. She thinks that I must have every chance, as she says. That means that I must pay as many visits and go about as much as I can, and perhaps I shall marry well. Well, is it worth running the risk? I should like it, too; but if I didn't succeed, I should get to hate everything, and turn into an Aunt Anne at last. Don't stare: every girl isn't engaged at seventeen. You are out of the scrape."

"I think Miss Florence is very happy,

and—very useful,” said Dulcie, after a moment.

“Oh, yes—yes. But she’s nearly thirty, isn’t she? And *she* isn’t poor. That’s just what I say. Why can’t I be like Florence Venning? I *have* talked to her about it, but she is dreadfully scrupulous about Aunt Anne, and said, too, that she didn’t think I counted the cost. I do, and I do believe I *ought* to set to work and earn my living. And I will—some day.”

“I am afraid you ought to obey Lady Anne,” said Dulcie, softly.

“Oh, Lady Anne! But just *think*, Dulcie, of that dull Bridgehurst. Gaieties now and then, of course; but such hard work to get ready for them. And I don’t care much about parish work; and what else can a girl do in the country? It’s all very well to be a ‘woodland nymph,’ as old Dr. Osgood called me the other day, when I met him in the Hurst, but nine months in

the year woods are up to your neck in mud. And I look *on*. I learnt that early. And you say I ought to be obedient and stay with Aunt Anne."

"It would be much harder to be good in that way," said Dulcie.

Dulcie was simple and loyal, and she believed that "the very most right" thing for Annie to do was to live quietly at Bridgehurst with her aunt, and wait for what life might bring her, abstaining alike from an undutiful independence and from those hopes and aims after a good match which injured her self-respect and were not apparently likely to be successful.

But Dulcie quite agreed that to lead this very dull life with a cheerful spirit would require a very high sort of goodness indeed, and that to go and work hard in a fine, spirited school, earning money, and perhaps saving it for future possibilities, would be much easier, and in many ways better, for

Annie herself, who had not the soft, clinging temper that would make a plunge into the world so dreadful, and indeed, poor girl, had not much to cling to. Dulcie had not much respect for the *manes* of the Macdonalds, though she thought much of duty to Lady Anne. Besides, Annie would never confess how far she regarded Alick's manifest devotion with favour. Dulcie believed that in her heart of hearts she was not indifferent to him.

"Hard to be good!" said Annie; "I should think so."

"Then why don't you try very hard to get leave?"

"Oh, because—because I'm not quite sure about it, Dulcie. *Perhaps*, alternate mud and balls is more to my taste than daily drudgery."

The two young men advanced upon them as Annie spoke, and Dulcie could not help fancying that she darted a look not all

ungracious at Alick, as he came slowly up behind Geoffrey. Geoffrey came briskly forward. The golden sunlight shone with peaceful warmth on Dulcie's welcoming face ; but it glittered with a bewildering dazzle on Annie's golden locks as she flitted away across the lawn at Alick's nearer approach.

"Just like our fortunes," thought Alick ; and he felt that the idea was poetical, even while it made his heart heavy.



CHAPTER XIII.

PAST AND PRESENT.

"I shall have had my day."

GEOFFREY and Dulcie spent some days together in blissful enjoyment of each other's society. They were young enough and clever enough to delight in the clash of their minds against each other, and they discussed and argued, and Dulcie received instruction and suggested ideas, "talking," as Alick said, "as if they had been a couple of fellows instead of peacefully spooning."

"Spoonng!" ejaculated Dulcie. "That would be dull indeed. I should be miserable if I could not talk to Geoff of everything that I have in my mind and hear his opinion on it. I think always of what he will say."

"And I," said Geoffrey. "I despise the

idea that women are to be regarded as play-things. My wife shall be my companion. And Dulcie suggests ideas to me—she does indeed.”

“Seems to me,” said Alick strolling away, “that it does nearly as well as spooning!”

However, the termination of Annie Macdonald's visit caused Alick to find his parochial duties more pressing, and one day, Geoffrey, rather at his mother's instigation, had arranged to go over and see him at Fordham, be introduced to his vicar, and gather an idea of how he was getting on. Dulcie meant to take the opportunity of paying a visit to Miss Florence. The way to Fordham from Fairfield crossed the meadows and avoided the town of Oxley, so they started together in the bright autumn morning to enjoy each other's company till a little field path diverged to Oxley Manor.

Dulcie stood on the sunny path gathering some yellow roses to fasten at her neck, while Geoffrey's voice sounded from the door as he concluded a long discourse with Captain Fordham on discipline in the army, on which subject, as on most others, he had views of his own. Captain Fordham admired Geoffrey, and thought him worthy to be trusted with his daughter, but that he was occasionally slightly bored by being called upon to use his mind so constantly and vigorously cannot be denied, and even Mrs. Fordham used to think that Geoffrey was hardly a young man who would have attracted a girl if she had not known him for half her life.

But Dulcie had no misgivings. He gave her a sense of power, her liveliness responded to his, and she had enough sense of the ridiculous to venture to laugh at him. She liked both his vehement love and his vehement opinions, and was quite

ready to engage in a discussion on university reform, interspersed with remarks on the beauty of the berry-covered hedges, and with bright anticipations of the future. Oxley was a pretty place; did Dulcie think that she would like to live there, if Geoffrey was so lucky as to get an inspectorship in the south?

Dulcie thought she would like it very much, but when Geoffrey warned her that he might be sent into the very middle of the Black Country, she smiled just as brightly, and thought that she should like it nearly as well.

They parted at the gate of the manor fields, and Geoffrey went back across the line and strolled along in the sunshine by the river side, while Dulcie tripped gaily up the field to the big, pleasant house beyond it, and as she opened the garden gate, Florence Venning, bright-haired and rosy-cheeked, with a wreath of autumn berries

in her hat, came down the path to meet her, with hearty kisses and congratulations.

"Dear little Dulcie!" she said, looking into the girl's blushing, beaming face. "I was so glad of your news, and it is very good of you to come and spend the last day of the holidays with me."

"Geoffrey is gone to see Alick at Fordham, you know," said Dulcie. "Isn't it a lovely day? I think this is the prettiest garden in the world."

"Yes, it is very pretty," said Florence; "my sister is very proud of her flowers. But this is not the best time of year to see it. I like it best when all the flowering trees are out in bloom."

"Oh, but the red berries on the old thorns and the Virginia creeper are just as nice in their way as the flowers. That old beech where we 'Silkworms' have spun such a lot of bad thread! I shall always love that."

"I shall lose my best spinner."

"Oh, no—no ; not yet," said Dulcie, blushing ; "and, besides, I sha'n't care one bit less for all the old things because of everything being settled. I care more."

Miss Florence smiled. Perhaps she had heard the same thing before from other maidens who had spun for her essays, poems, or works of art for the 'Society of Silkworms,' which enjoyed under her superintendence a great deal of delightful sense, and even more delightful nonsense. But at this moment "Flossy ! Flossy !" sounded down the path, and a little boy and girl came running towards them, followed by a lady in a pretty autumn dress.

"What, Lily and Arty ?" said Florence, kissing them. "Have you got a holiday too?"

"Yes," cried the girl, a creature with a soft face of foreign tinting, but very vehement English accents. "Mamma has

brought us to tell you the news—two great pieces of news!”

“Flossy nearly knows the news,” said Mrs. Spencer Crichton, as she kissed Florence and shook hands with Dulcie; “but I promised they should tell you. Now, one at a time.”

“Uncle Arthur is coming home in October,” said the boy, “and father is *delighted*. You didn’t know *that* news, did you, Flossy?”

“And when Christmas comes we are all going to live with grandmamma at Redhurst!” cried Lily. “And nobody would have thought of such a piece of news as *that*!”

Florence had taken the boy in her arms as he spoke, and kissed him as she said:

“Wonderful news!” with rather a hurried accent. And then—“Has Mr. Crichton heard from Arthur?”

“Yes. It is quite settled now, and he

will stay six months at least. You know we should have moved to Redhurst before this, for mother is very lonely now Frederica is married, but Hugh fancied that Arthur would like best to come first to the Bank House, and we should like to have him there. It is eight years since our cousin left us," she added to Dulcie, "so he will find many changes."

"These creatures, for instance," said Flossy, "and——"

She laughed a little as she looked at her friend's soft matronly dignity, and happy, confident air, remembering the bashful, childish bride of eight years back.

"Ah, yes," said Mrs. Crichton, answering the look; "but I do not forget how kind he was to me, and I want him to come to the Bank House, that I may make him happy and comfortable my own self. He says that some one he knows is coming home in the same ship—a widower with a

little girl—and asks us if we can find any sort of lodging for him, not expensive, for he is very poor.”

“Is he a gentleman?” asked Florence.

“Hugh could not tell. I think not, for he wants some kind of clerkship. But I have been inquiring. Do you think Mrs. Jones at Laurel Terrace would do, as she was their nurse at Redhurst? She would like to oblige Arthur.”

“Oh, yes,” said Florence, “she has some charming little rooms.”

“Then, *Lilia mia*, and Arty, come along and see Mrs. Jones about it, or we shall not get home to lunch.”

“When we live at Redhurst I shall be old enough to come to school to Flossy,” said Lily, as she ran away.

“Ah, they are very clever,” said the young mother proudly, “but I am afraid little Hughie is stupid—like me—and can only sing.”

"I am sure Mrs. Crichton doesn't look stupid," said Dulcie, when the farewells were said.

"Well, she is not exactly clever," said Florence. "But Mr. Spencer will hardly know the shy foreign girl he left eight years ago. Violante has learned to be a great lady, and is busy and happy; but she is a loving creature, and faithful to her heart's core."

"Mr. Crichton doesn't look as if he was the hero of a romantic story," said Dulcie.

"He never did look like it. But don't credit the Manor with *his* romance, Dulcie. The mischief was all done in Italy, and we were only an unconscious episode. I dare say, though," she added, laughing, "that there is a wonderful myth current among the girls by this time."

"Oh, Miss Flossy, that time seems like a sort of golden age. When I began to come here, how I used to wish that any of the

governesses were like Mrs. Spencer Crichton. But I did not know that Mr. Spencer had anything to do with *that* story."

"I don't think he had, exactly," returned Florence. "He was only kind to her, when he was in trouble himself."

"Ah, we used to talk about him too," said Dulcie with an inflection of pity in her variable tones. "But I don't think I know exactly——"

"Mysie Crofton was at school here," said Florence. "You know, she, as well as the young Spencers, was brought up by Mrs. Crichton at Redhurst. Directly she grew up, she and Arthur were engaged to each other. She was—I never cared so much for any girl, of course I was a girl then myself. Then—oh, Hugh and Arthur were out shooting rabbits, and Hugh's gun frightened her as she stood on the lock gate. There used to be a lock there, where Redhurst station is."

"She was drowned?" said Dulcie.

"Yes. That *was* a trouble."

"Did Mr. Spencer see?"

"Oh yes. He was very patient, very good. But, of course, it just spoiled his life for him. It was all planned out here. He was to have a partnership in the bank, and they would have lived in the Bank House."

"But he couldn't do that afterwards."

"No. You see there was a great nervous shock as well as the sorrow, and he was quite upset and unhinged by it. I suppose Mr. Crichton suffered even more. But he did all he could for him; and when Arthur couldn't bear all the associations of Redhurst they went together to the Bank House for a time. Then, when he had recovered himself a little, Arthur made up his mind to go out to the branch of their bank in India. And he has got on very well, and writes, they all say, very happily.

Violante thinks that Hugh is much more nervous about the home-coming than Arthur himself. But I don't know how they can tell—he never would vex other people.”

Florence stood still while she was speaking under the thorn tree, and Dulcie sat on the bench, looking up at her with eager interest.

“It was a long time ago,” she said. “A long time to be unhappy.”

“Yes; long enough to sweep everything away—the lock and the canal and the meadows. All went when the railway was made, and he is quite a great man, I believe, in Calcutta. Yes, it's a long time ago. But oh, that dreadful wedding day! He would have it before he sailed.”

“I can't think how he could bear it!” said Dulcie.

“Really,” said Florence, “I don't think he minded it much. The parting with all

that were left was very little in comparison to him, and he was delighted at his cousin's happiness. But I really think, if he had been less unselfish about it, it would have been easier to bear—for Hugh. It was dreadful to him to start on his wedding trip after such a parting, and to think of Arthur going away alone."

"Were they married here?"

"Oh no, in London. Violante's uncle lives there. Every one was stiff, and there was a great fog. The Spencers all stayed in London till after he sailed. I had to come home in the afternoon."

Florence Venning sat silent, her bright clear eyes, for once, as dreamy as Dulcie's, but her mouth set hard; while Dulcie vividly imagined the dreary foggy London day, marked by such cruel memories.

"Well!" said Florence suddenly, with a start. "It is, as you say, a long time ago; and no one can expect to begin again where

they left off. Haven't you had Annie with you? What is she about?"

Dulcie would much have preferred to hear more of these old romances, but she respected the change of subject, and said:

"Annie still hankers after being a school-mistress."

"She never will," said Florence, rather bluntly.

"You think Lady Anne would never consent?"

"Annie's own mind is not made up. And nobody can persuade other people unless they believe in their own intentions. Besides, it would be a very hard life for Annie, she is clever, and has a good deal of mechanical technical knowledge; but she does not like teaching, and girls, generally, bore her. And then, of course, Lady Anne is so far right, that she is rather too much of a swell, not having any vocation for it. There are a good many little objections in

her case, and she hasn't fervour enough to override them."

"Yes, that's true," said Dulcie; and then after a slight pause, she said, "Alick is so happy at Fordham, he likes and admires Mr. Blandford very much."

"I suppose so," said Florence. "I am sure his influence must be good for any one."

Dulcie peeped round under her eyelashes. For was it not surmised by all the Manor House maidens that Mr. Blandford was a bachelor for Miss Florence's sake, and that if she did not prefer girls and school-keeping to matrimony, she might be Mrs. Blandford at any moment. And some of their mothers thought that it would be so suitable; for, though Florence Venning danced on occasion, and played lawn tennis, wore very becoming clothes, and was still under thirty, every one knew that her real tastes were for education and good

works. She was "so very superior," and as Mr. Blandford was also rather a marked person in the neighbourhood, why shouldn't they come together?

But Miss Florence looked quite calm and unconscious, as indeed she always did, when, as sometimes happened, she quoted Mr. Blandford's opinion when she gave lessons on church history, or kindred subjects; and Dulcie could only wonder, in silence, whether there was anything in it.

There was more talk about the Spencer Crichtons, when they were joined by Miss Venning, a handsome pleasant lady, still in her prime; and afterwards, Dulcie's turn for talking came, and sitting on the floor at Miss Flossy's feet, she told her much, half-intentionally, half-unconsciously, of the simple sunny course that her true love had run; till Florence was obliged to leave her to give the last of some holiday lessons with which she had been helping a young

and incompetent governess to improve herself.

“Are you to wait at the stile for Mr. Leighton? I am so sorry to send you by yourself; but I mustn’t disappoint poor little Miss Simpson.”

“I shall not mind,” said Dulcie. “I like to look at the river and the fields, and Geoffrey will be here in a few minutes.”

So, after an affectionate parting, Dulcie went down the field path again, crossed the railway, and sat down on a stile by the river-side. But she did not look along the path by which Geoffrey was coming; she turned her head towards Redhurst, and watched the railway, cutting through the fields, and under the wide copses, to where she could see the sun flash on the signal-box at Redhurst station.

There, long ago, yet well within her memory, another girl, such as she, in the first promise of her life, had been suddenly

snatched away. Another sweet love story had run its course—how brief a one!—among those very woods and fields. One moment all hope and happiness, and the next, what awful desolation, what blackness of darkness must have fallen on the actors in that long-past tragedy—for eight years seemed long to the young Dulcie! And yet that horror had been outlived, those bitter tears had been dried. Florence Venning was always busy and bright, with a life full of interests, and no shadow that Dulcie had ever seen on her broad brows. Mysie might have been the dearest, but other friends had since been very dear. Mr. Crichton, who, Florence said, had suffered the most, bore no look of eternal remorse, or even regret; but was a handsome, prosperous gentleman, to whom life was manifestly a good thing. Redhurst was a gay and cheerful house, one of the pleasantest for young people in the neigh-

bourhood. It had been so dreadful, and it was all over and passed away. Could it be the same with the young lover whose hopes had been crushed by such an awful blow? It seemed to Dulcie as if the fact of the young girl's frightful death under such pathetic circumstances was not nearly such a woeful thing as the fact that the world had gone on much the same without her; that the sun still shone, though the waters had closed over her head; that new lives had obliterated hers, as completely as the new railway had destroyed every trace of the old canal. What if such a thing were to happen to herself? What, if she too, were to stand some day a moment too long on that fated spot? to look just the wrong way till the train dashed through the station, and she too would have looked her last on the blue sky and the sweet woodlands, and on all the fair future that she and Geoffrey were to live together? Then,

indeed, there would be mourning and grief, but the world would go on without her. All who loved her—even Geoffrey—would live on; and, if they lived without her, would find content. Dulcie locked her hands together, her eyes grew wide as the picture came vividly before her. She forgot the present, till she felt a hand on her shoulder.

“Why, Dulcie, did you think the express would drop me at your feet?”

Dulcie turned, and threw her arms round him with a sudden vehement clasp.

“Oh, Geoff—Geoff!” she cried, and burst into tears, “if you were to die, I never—never should forget you!”

“Why, Dulcie, my dearest, what is it? Are you frightened? Have you been alone?”

“Oh, no, but——” and as she tried to tell the story she grew ashamed and slipped away from him, trying to laugh at herself.

Geoffrey, living and loving, stood before her. She felt his warm clasp, she saw his bright eyes, and the real and joyous present reasserted himself over the dreamy past. She lost her momentary sense of life's uncertainty, of the possibility of sorrow, and though she tried to tell him what had distressed her, probably Geoffrey never quite understood the impression that had been made on her.

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